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The New Criterion

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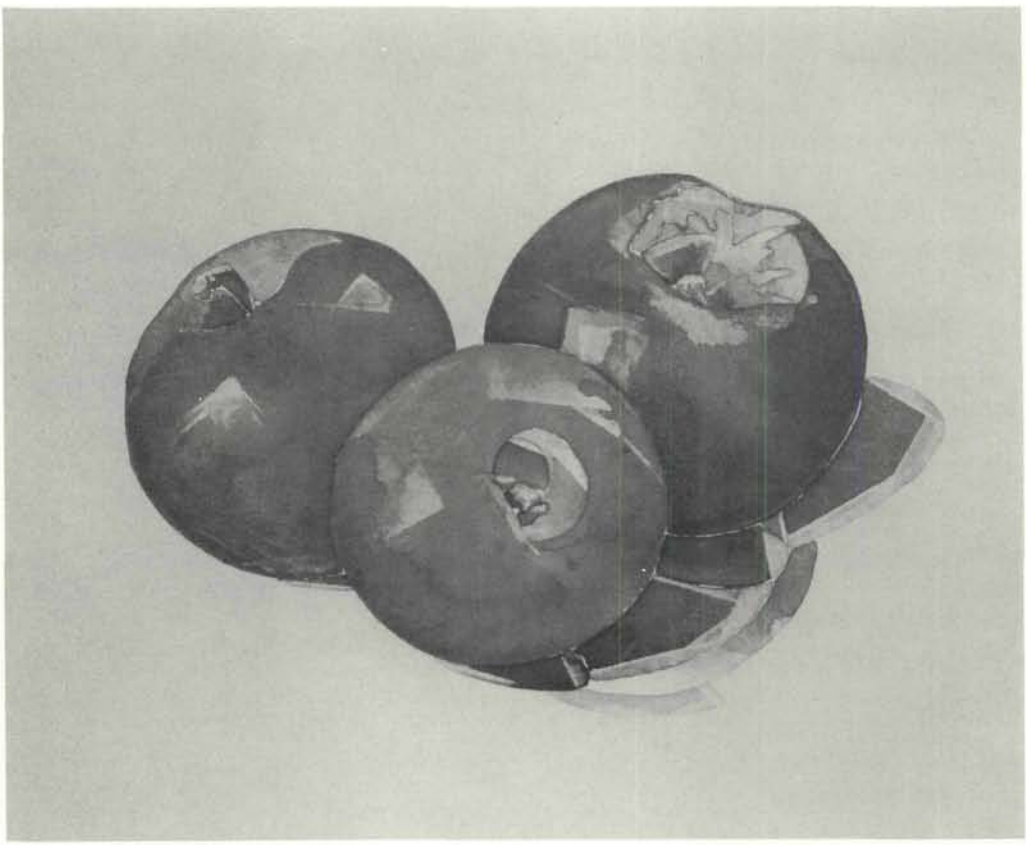

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Bloomsbury idols
by Hilton Kramer

. . . it was exciting, exhilarating, the beginning of a renaissance, the opening of a new heaven on a new earth, we were the forerunners of a new dispensation . . . .
—John Maynard Keynes, in "My Early Beliefs" (1938)

Bloomsbury, like Clapham, was a coterie. It was exclusive and clannish. It regarded outsiders as unconverted . . . . Remarks which did not show that grace had descended upon the utterer were met with killing silence . . . . Like Clapham, Bloomsbury had discovered a new creed: the same exhilaration filled the air, the same conviction that a new truth had been disclosed, a new Kingdom conquered.
—Noel Annan, in *Leslie Stephen* (1952)

It is startling now to be reminded that as recently as 1968—a year that saw a great many changes in our cultural life—Bloomsbury could still be described, without fear of contradiction, as "unfashionable." In fact it was so described by Michael Holroyd in the mammoth biography of Lytton Strachey which he published that year. Yet no sooner was the pronouncement made but Bloomsbury was suddenly all the rage again, and it was no doubt Mr. Holroyd's biography which set this great reversal in motion. There is no reason, however, to suppose that Mr. Holroyd deliberately set out to achieve so large a goal. According to his own testimony, anyway, his original intention was far more modest.[1] Yet the consequences of his immense biographical enterprise proved to be fateful indeed. Bloomsbury was triumphantly restored to literary fashion, and a not inconsiderable revolution in taste was launched on a course which shows no sign of abatement these sixteen years later. The time for a revival of the Bloomsbury ethos was riper, perhaps, than even Mr. Holroyd had quite understood at the time.

It tells us much, I think, that Mr. Holroyd set out to write one kind of book and ended by writing a book of a very different kind. For in the changes that overtook his task in the course of its realization we are given a key to the larger revival which his book was crucial in inaugurating. His original plan, he tells us, was to write "a revaluation of Strachey's place as a serious historian." This, not surprisingly, proved to be a futile endeavor. By no tenable standard, either then or now, could a case be made for Lytton Strachey as "a serious historian." He had never been that kind of writer, and any attempt to portray him as such was therefore doomed from the outset. Bertrand Russell—not exactly an unfriendly witness—was only stating the obvious when he observed that Strachey was

1 Mr. Holroyd discusses his work on the Strachey biography in "The Slow Progress of a Biographer" (reprinted in *Unreceived Opinions,* published by Heineman in 1973).

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"indifferent to historical truth."[2] This did not mean that Strachey was a figure without interest, however. Far from it. Only that the focus of interest, at this distance in time, would lie less in what Strachey wrote than in what he was. It was precisely this discovery which, when he finally made it, opened up Mr. Holroyd's subject for him. Thenceforth his project followed an unimpeded course. "I had come to the conclusion," he writes, "that Strachey was one of those historians whose work was so personal that it could only be illuminated by some biographical commentary." This was the crucial turn, not only in the writing of *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography* but in the revival of Bloomsbury itself. Not criticism but *biography* was to be the foundation on which this revival would be based.

This is in itself a development worth pondering. Literary and artistic revivals, while always answering to some need or desire of the historical moment in which they are brought forth, vary greatly in the purposes they are destined to serve. They are by no means uniform either in their appeal or in their function. The great revival of seventeenth-century Metaphysical poetry initiated by T. S. Eliot in the early decades of this century, for example, had virtually nothing to do with a biographical interest in the poets themselves. It was strictly critical and creative—the work of a poet seeking to recover a tradition that would nourish and support the artistic aims of his own poetry. Eliot took an entire generation of poets and critics with him in his revisionist view of the English poetic tradition, and decisively changed the history as well as the historiography of literature in the process. When new biographical studies of the Metaphysical poets came to be written, they were produced as a result of this literary revival—they were not its cause.

Precisely the opposite has been the case with the Bloomsbury revival. It is biography which has set the pace of this revival and provided its principal texts and pretexts. The large body of criticism inspired by the revival—to the extent, that is, that it may be regarded as criticism at all—has remained, for the most part, closely tethered to the biographical mode, taking its cues from the lives rather than from the works of the group's major and minor figures. In part, of course, this turnabout is yet another reflection of the precipitous decline of criticism that began to make itself felt in the Sixties—at the very moment, in fact, when the fortunes of Bloomsbury were beginning to be revived. Looking back, it can now be seen that the one development was a necessary prerequisite to the other. Criticism, after all, addresses itself to achievement, whereas biography is chiefly concerned with character and circumstance. Criticism creates standards; biography—as it is currently practiced, anyway—creates idols (or else topples them). Criticism deals with the accomplishments of mind, biography with the vicissitudes of the heart. Can there be any doubt as to which of these the champions of Bloomsbury are primarily interested in? We all know (or we should) that there are great biographies which transcend these distinctions—biographies which are governed by a clear critical intelligence. But they have been remarkable for their rarity in every generation since Dr. Johnson wrote his *Lives of the Poets,* and few indeed can be found in the proliferating biographical literature on Bloomsbury. The latter, on the contrary, has tended to specialize in the creation of idols and to avoid the kind of disinterested judgment which it is one of the essential tasks of criticism to perform.

Lytton Strachey is far from being the only member of the Bloomsbury group to benefit from this changed relation of criticism to biography—though in his case it proved to be indispensable to the rehabilitation of his reputation, for it is unlikely that he would

2 "He is indifferent to historical truth," Russell wrote, "and will always touch up the picture to make the lights and shades more glaring and the folly or wickedness of famous people more obvious. These are grave charges, but I make them in all seriousness." (*The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell: 1872-1914,* page 99.)

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any longer be read at all if not for the biographical luster conferred upon him by Mr. Holroyd's "Life" and the succession of Bloomsbury biographies which have followed in its wake. No less a figure than Virginia Woolf, surely the best writer (though not, I think, the finest mind) in the group, has enjoyed an even more spectacular benefit from this drastically altered perspective. For it is not Woolf's novels which are primarily responsible for the radical elevation of her reputation in recent years, but the many volumes of *Diaries* and *Letters* and memoirs that have been added to Quentin Bell's avowedly uncritical biography to form a literary edifice which so overshadows the fiction that the latter is now largely read (and admired!) as a gloss on the life of its author. Prior to this outpouring of biographical revelation, Woolf's novels could claim a certain following, to be sure, but they cannot be said to have won anything remotely approaching the acclaim and adulation which are nowadays routinely lavished upon even the least of them. Nor was it (as it is sometimes claimed) only the contributors to *Scrutiny* who found Virginia Woolf seriously deficient as a novelist. This tended to be the judgment of the best critics writing on both sides of the Atlantic for decades prior to the present revival. There may be reason to quarrel with certain aspects of this critical consensus, but it must be recognized that it *was* a consensus and that it represented a considered judgment of the *novels*. It did not duck the task of critical judgment by taking refuge in factitious interpretations of the troubled life of the woman who wrote them.

Where biography is given such radical priority over criticism, the actual accomplishments of a writer or artist are inevitably placed at an intellectual discount, if indeed they are not rendered altogether superfluous. And it follows from this practice that a lack of significant accomplishment will not in itself be deemed a serious obstacle to the writing of a full-scale biographical study. The absence of an oeuvre demanding to be taken seriously may even facilitate the writing of such biographies. Where accomplishment is seen to be negligible the biographer is at liberty to devote uninterrupted attention to the life, and will feel under no obligation to provide the kind of overweight analyses of literary or artistic trifles which so encumbered Mr. Holroyd's *Strachey* and made its "critical" interludes something of a chore to read. (My guess is that most readers simply skipped them.) This, in any case, is the stage we seem to have arrived at in the biographical literature on Bloomsbury: there is no longer even a pretense that it is the subject's literary, artistic, or intellectual distinction that causes a new biography to be written. All interest now focuses on the life itself. And yet this is not quite correct either. For much that is crucial and contradictory in life must, perforce, be left out—or else made to seem marginal—in the interests of erecting an idol. It is not so much the real life of these failed writers and artists that is expected to command our interest as it is their so-called "life style," which in the case of Bloomsbury means, above all, that peculiar combination of sex, snobbery, aestheticism, ambition, and what Keynes characterized as "immoralism" which served the group as an ethical model in its own day and which functions as a standard for its admirers today. "Life style" is what the biographer is left with as his subject when the *work* is relegated to the background.

In this respect, the lives of Vanessa Bell and Vita Sackville-West are ideally suited to the new biographical mode. As artists in their respective fields—Bell as a painter, Sackville-West as a writer—they scarcely count as anything more than minor episodes in the history of English taste. Both were heaped with praise, honors, and commissions in their lifetime, as minor talents often are, yet almost nothing in their work survives today as living art. Nor, interestingly, do we find any serious critical claim made for their work in the books which have now been written about their lives. This refusal to make a critical case cannot, in the present instances, be ascribed to intellectual incompetence. Both Frances Spalding, the author of *Vanessa Bell,*

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and Victoria Glendinning, the author of *Vita: The Life of V. Sackville-West,*[3] have elsewhere shown themselves to be in possession of real critical gifts. Mrs. Spalding gave us an excellent critical biography of Roger Fry as recently as 1980.[4] *Roger Fry: Art and Life* was anything but a flawless book, but it was written, all the same, on the assumption that Fry's accomplishments as a critic, painter, and connoisseur constituted the principal reason for our interest in him. Mrs. Spalding recognized, moreover, that Fry's ideas had exerted an immense influence on subsequent critical thought, and still served as a touchstone wherever the formalist criticism of art continued to be practiced or debated. She therefore made a sustained attempt to trace the development of those ideas and elucidate their meaning. It was this intellectual focus, rather than its account of Fry's amatory history, that gave *Roger Fry: Art and Life* its special distinction.

Victoria Glendinning's practice is somewhat different. In her critical journalism she has not hesitated to render some sharp and intelligent judgments on her own contemporaries, but she seems to regard the art of biography as an essentially noncritical literary genre. In her earlier biographical studies of Elizabeth Bowen and Edith Sitwell she dropped a good many hints as to where the problems for criticism might lie in the respective oeuvres of these writers, but she studiously avoided the tasks of criticism herself. Now in *Vita* even these hints are kept to a minimum—and with good reason, I suppose. For surely a writer of Miss Glendinning's gifts must know that Sackville-West's work would not be likely to survive even the most cursory sort of critical inquiry. Yet what does it mean to write the life of a writer whose work one cannot take seriously? It means that the biographer must find something exemplary in the life—something so important that it transcends the failure of the work. As to exactly what this is in the case of Vita Sackville-West—well, that is a question which takes us back to Bloomsbury and the spirit of its current revival.

Vanessa Bell and Vita Sackville-West occupy very different places, of course, in the historical hierarchy of Bloomsbury personalities. Vanessa Bell, the sister of Virginia Woolf, the wife of Clive Bell, and the lover, successively, of Roger Fry and Duncan Grant, stands—as Sackville-West does not—at the very center of the group as one of its animating and indispensable spirits. It was Vanessa Bell who established the principal households, first in London and then in the countryside, where the social, intellectual, and sexual attitudes promulgated by Lytton Strachey and his friends at Cambridge came to be transformed into a new bohemian code. She thus served Bloomsbury as both its housemother and its earth mother, initiating nothing in the realm of art or ideas but bringing enormous reserves of energy, audacity, confidence, and practical management to the creation and re-enforcement of the "new dispensation," as Keynes called it, which governed the lives of the group as an ideal alternative to the standards it was hell-bent on rejecting.

Vanessa Bell was central, in other words, in helping to set and maintain the moral tone of Bloomsbury. That she was also an artist was absolutely essential to her position and the authority it exerted, yet it hardly seemed to matter that her artistic accomplishments were so slim. It was the fact of her being an artist—and an artist of a certain type: a modernist—rather than the quality of her art that was necessary for the moral role she played. But it was morals (of a certain kind), not art, that paradoxically gave to Bloomsbury aestheticism its special quality. It is for this reason, by the way, that an art historian like Frances Spalding may not be the best sort of biographer for a figure like Vanessa Bell. Art history is finally peripheral to the subject, which is moral rebellion.

This being the case, it is especially impor-

3 *Vanessa Bell* by Frances Spalding; Ticknor & Fields, 399 pages, $22.95; and *Vita: The Life of V. Sackville-West* by Victoria Glendinning; Alfred A. Knopf, 436 pages, $17.95.

4 For my review of *Roger Fry: Art and Life,* see *The New York Times Book Review* for October 5, 1980.

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tant that we understand the nature of the Bloomsbury rebellion. What in fact were the standards that Bloomsbury sought to demolish? Following the conventional wisdom on this subject, Mrs. Spalding characterizes these as "the Victorian intellectual and moral pressures that had, to a greater or lesser extent, weighed on [the] youth" of Vanessa Bell and her friends. Yet the biography which Mrs. Spalding has now given us does not really support this view. Certainly no orthodox Victorian paterfamilias would have given his daughter the complete freedom of his large and unexpurgated library from the age of fifteen onward, as in fact Sir Leslie Stephen did in the case of his daughter Virginia. Nor would this Victorian ogre of legend have permitted a daughter to enroll in an art school, with all of its attendant moral risks, at the first sign of her artistic interests, as in fact Stephen did in the case of his daughter Vanessa. This, in turn, reminds us that in the entire literature on Bloomsbury there is a curious and telling tendency to telescope the history of its antecedents in order to establish a more direct link with the high Victorian age than Bloomsbury actually had. And it is not just any view of the Victorian age which is called upon to serve this purpose, but a specifically Stracheyesque view of Victorian repression and hypocrisy.

The truth seems to have been a little more complicated, however. For it was not so much a Victorian as an Edwardian upbringing that Vanessa Stephen and her sister were given. And while the Edwardian code unquestionably contained certain elements of the Victorian ethos, these were already being undermined (where they were not completely effaced) by the more liberal and even radical impulses which found expression in such diverse movements and events as the aestheticism of the Nineties, the Fabian Society, the clamor for women's suffrage and education, realism in fiction and the theater, and the debate over imperialism which caused such fierce divisions at the time of the Boer War and deeply affected the literary imagination of the generation immediately preceding that of Virginia Woolf. Almost nothing in the whole Bloomsbury phenomenon—neither its feminism, its homosexuality, its pacifism, its anti-imperialism, its aestheticism, nor its quarrel with realism—is wholly intelligible, in fact, without reference to the concatenation of changes which erupted with such far-reaching force in the Edwardian period. Even the vaunted anti-Victorianism of Bloomsbury represented the codification of an attitude already ascendant in the Edwardian age. Yet Bloomsbury continues to be discussed as if it sprang up—by virgin birth, as it were—as a simple rebellion against the cartoon characters who populate the pages of *Eminent Victorians.*

The writer who best understood this matter was Bertrand Russell, who was in a position to observe the development of Bloomsbury from the perspective of a contemporary belonging to an older generation. Writing in his *Autobiography* about the Cambridge Conversazione Society, where so many Bloomsbury attitudes were first adumbrated, Russell made a point of isolating this Edwardian element as a key to understanding these attitudes. "Some things became considerably different in the Society after my time," Russell wrote.

> The tone of the generation some ten years junior to my own was set mainly by Lytton Strachey and Keynes. It is surprising how great a change in mental climate those ten years had brought. We were still Victorian; they were Edwardian. We believed in ordered progress by means of politics and free discussion. The more self-confident among us may have hoped to be leaders of the multitude, but none of us wished to be divorced from it. The generation of Keynes and Lytton did not seek to preserve any kinship with the Philistine. They aimed rather at a life of retirement among fine shades and nice feelings, and conceived of the good as consisting in the passionate mutual admirations of a clique of the élite.

And further:

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> After my time the Society changed in one respect. There was a long drawn-out battle between George Trevelyan and Lytton Strachey, both members, in which Lytton Strachey was on the whole victorious. Since his time, homosexual relations among the members were for a time common, but in my day they were unknown.

It is sad to see a writer as intelligent as Frances Spalding succumb to a sort of historical amnesia about all this. She certainly knows the whole period well enough to have gotten it right. For what *was* the life of Vanessa Bell if not an attempt—and a failed attempt at that—to live "a life of retirement among fine shades and nice feelings"? She, too, seems to have "conceived of the good as consisting in the passionate mutual admirations of a clique of the élite," and to have lived much of her adult life in accordance with this brittle standard. In this, as in so much else in the Bloomsbury story, we see the legacy of Edwardian aestheticism transmuted into the even narrower ethos of coterie bohemianism, with inherited social snobberies now inverted to reject the respectable and the conventional in favor of the perverse and the esoteric.

Had Mrs. Spalding been writing the life of a more important artist, I think it likely that the *work* would have obliged her to re-examine the many received assumptions which have been allowed to pass into *Vanessa Bell* like so much unopened baggage. But there is nothing in Vanessa Bell's work that requires a critic to rethink anything in the art of the period Mrs. Spalding is writing about—except, perhaps, the way artistic reputations were sometimes made. The work simply registers a succession of passive and mildly talented responses to the artistic ideas which gained currency in Bell's circle of friends and lovers, and what reputation it acquired in the artist's lifetime had much to do with the promotional efforts of this same circle.[5]

Not surprisingly, Mrs. Spalding is on much firmer ground when she turns away from the art of Vanessa Bell (which she does as often as possible in this book) to recount the bizarre history of her subject's personal affairs. Yet there, too, while nothing if not candid in disclosing a great many unpleasant facts—especially regarding Vanessa Bell's protracted liaison with the homosexual Duncan Grant—Mrs. Spalding can never quite bring herself to align these facts, which have much to do with concealment and a kind of emotional martyrdom, with the values that Bloomsbury prided itself on living by. Foremost among these values—according to the Bloomsbury myth, anyway—was what Virginia Woolf called "the old Cambridge ideal of truth and free speaking." This has been said again and again to have been the moral cornerstone of the Bloomsbury ethic. Yet the truth is, this "ideal of truth and free speaking" was rarely, if ever, the governing principle of Vanessa Bell's adult life. For one thing, she could never speak openly of her true feelings about the homosexual attachments which remained central to Duncan Grant's existence during all the years they lived together. On the con-

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5 The charge that Bloomsbury reputations were often the result of the group's own efforts at self-promotion is nowadays commonly dismissed as just another example of the kind of paranoia endemic to *Scrutiny* and the Leavis circle. It is therefore instructive to read the following passages from an article written by Clive Bell in November 1917 about an exhibition organized by Roger Fry: "Only one Englishman holds his own with the French painters, and he, of course, is Duncan Grant . . . . Grant is . . . blessed with adorable gifts and a powerful intellect, he should . . . become what we have been awaiting so long, an English painter in the front rank of European art." And further in the same article: "Of the remaining British artists, the most interesting, to my mind, is Vanessa Bell . . . . Today there are at least three [women artists who hold their own with their male counterparts]—Marie Laurencin, Goncharova, and Vanessa Bell—whose claim to take rank amongst the best of their generation will have to be answered very carefully by those who wish to disallow it." See *Pot-Boilers* by Clive Bell (Chatto and Windus, 1918).

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trary, she was obliged to extend hospitality and even a show of affection to his many male lovers as a condition for being allowed to have a place in his life. She always knew that Grant had never loved her in the way that she had come to love him, and she accepted the humiliations of the situation in silence. But by then, of course, remaining silent about the way she lived was already a habit with Vanessa Bell. When she rejected her husband and took other lovers, and he took up with a succession of mistresses, to whom she was also obliged to extend hospitality throughout her life, this too had to be concealed—most notably, from Clive Bell's wealthy and eminently respectable parents, whose tastes and interests Vanessa Bell loathed but upon whose financial generosity the Bells were largely dependent for their "free" way of life. (Neither Vanessa nor Clive Bell ever had to work for a living.) The "life of retirement among fine shades and nice feelings" wasn't cheap, and it was the benighted parents of her husband—the very archetypes of the Philistine squirearchy which Bloomsbury held in such contempt—who were expected to pay the bills. Reading *Vanessa Bell,* one quickly comes to realize that the Victorians had nothing to teach Bloomsbury when it came to self-interested concealment and hypocrisy.

The most egregious example of the Bloomsbury double standard—for that is what it always came down to—is to be found in the appalling tale of Vanessa Bell's daughter, whose father was known to virtually all members of the inner circle to be Duncan Grant but who was nonetheless brought up to believe that she was the child of Clive Bell. Again, the principal reason for this deception seems to have been the need to conceal the truth from Clive Bell's parents, who, being the sort of dodoes they were, could not be expected to react to the actual situation with the requisite sympathy and understanding. And no wonder—for there was quite a lot to the situation that required some understanding. At the time of the child's birth, Vanessa Bell found herself presiding over a difficult ménage à trois, with David Garnett more or less in residence as Duncan Grant's favorite of the moment. As it turned out, the man who proved to be the most passionately devoted to the newborn child was neither its actual father nor its official one but Garnett, the child's father's lover, who promptly announced his intention of marrying the girl—which, to the horror of Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, he actually succeeded in doing some twenty-odd years later. About *that,* interestingly, these pillars of Bloomsbury liberation acted as if they were performing a charade of outraged Victorian parenthood.

Meanwhile, Bloomsbury's celebrated candor in matters having to do with sexual behavior—all the much-quoted talk about "buggers" and "semen" and such—was totally suspended in the girl's upbringing. Not only was she kept in perfect ignorance about the fact that the man whom she and her mother lived with was her real father but she was also kept in the dark about the most elementary facts of life. So complete was the daughter's innocence in this respect that at the age of seventeen she had to be sent to a physician to be instructed in the mysteries of sex. Even this proved to be futile, alas, for the physician (a woman) was so stunned by the girl's ignorance that she could not bring herself to explain anything. Clearly, the ideal of "truth and free speaking" had its limitations even for Bloomsbury. So too, by the way, did the application of Bloomsbury's feminist standards. Thus, while the Bells' two sons were brought up in the expected atmosphere of sexual candor and as young adults were encouraged to disclose the details of their sexual affairs to their mother, Vanessa Bell's daughter was allowed no such freedom of action or expression. She seems to have been raised in a moral void, denied the advantages (such as they were) of Bloomsbury's "new dispensation," yet denied as well whatever comfort, security, or guidance might have been provided by the conventions it was designed to displace.

About all this, too, Mrs. Spalding gives us a very frank and unsparing account. Yet for all of its frankness, there is finally something

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just a bit obtuse about this book. It is as if the glamor and prestige of its dramatis personae have had the effect of stripping its author of her capacity to form a judgment of either the actions or the characters she so meticulously describes. Just as every aesthetic allowance must be made, implicitly or otherwise, for Vanessa Bell's limited artistic accomplishment, so must every moral allowance be made for the way she lived her life. The result is a biography which substitutes psychological understanding for moral insight—which is now the standard formula for Bloomsbury biography.

One has the feeling in reading *Vita: The Life of V. Sackville-West* that Victoria Glendinning, too, might have preferred to write a biography similarly devoid of moral intelligence. But in this case it just wasn't possible. The protagonist of the book is herself such a monster of moral insensibility and so much of her story entails a description of the human wreckage left in the wake of her sometimes casual, sometimes insidious depredations, that, try as Miss Glendinning does to avoid it, she cannot help showing her distaste from time to time and even registering a note of censure. Perhaps to compensate for this tendency, she offers a handsome array of exonerating factors to explain some of Sackville-West's more outrageous actions —the crazy mother, the weak husband, the laws and customs governing primogeniture, etc.—but they avail her not. In the end she cannot bring herself to duck the problem of Sackville-West's atrocious character, and she wins our enduring gratitude for refusing to swallow the preposterous notion put forward by Nigel Nicolson in *Portrait of a Marriage*—one of the really remarkable literary farces of the Seventies—that Sackville-West's marriage to Harold Nicolson somehow constituted a model of modern marital bliss.

But that whole story in most of its details lies well outside the history of Bloomsbury and its revival. Sackville-West was an outsider who entered Bloomsbury as Virginia Woolf's lover, and she remains a permanent part of its history solely as the character who inspired Woolf to write *Orlando,* the most original work of fiction that Bloomsbury produced and the only work of the imagination in which so many of its abiding values—particularly its social and sexual snobbery, its hermaphroditic ideal, its compulsion to aestheticize all experience, and its Camp attitude toward history and morals—are openly stated and definitively embodied. Yet it is precisely because of Sackville-West's importance in this one regard that *Vita* proves to be inadequate. Almost any biography of this sort would be. For once the basic facts have been established—and in the case of *Orlando* they have never been in doubt since the day of its publication—*Orlando* is a problem not in biography but in criticism, and in *Vita,* of course, there is no criticism.

The more one looks into the Bloomsbury revival, the more convinced one is that Bloomsbury, despite the immense number of books, articles, and reviews already devoted to it, is a subject which has not yet found its writer, and that the writer it calls for is unlikely to be a specialist in biography. Bloomsbury can be said to have produced only four figures of enduring intellectual interest: Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, John Maynard Keynes, and Roger Fry. Of these, only Keynes and Fry can be claimed as major figures in the intellectual disciplines they pursued. Forster looks smaller with every passing day, and Woolf was never the major novelist she is nowadays assumed to be (usually for a variety of extra-literary reasons). In the realm of high culture Bloomsbury's achievements are actually remarkably small. But the Bloomsbury revival is not really concerned with high achievements of mind or art. It was not in art or literature but in the realm of moral rebellion that Bloomsbury achieved its most significant and enduring influence, and it is precisely *that* which has been recalled and embellished and newly propagated in the current revival. It is therefore to this moral rebellion—in which, incidentally, Bloomsbury's aestheticism will be seen to be a symptom rather than a cause—that criticism will be obliged to address itself.

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And the best place for criticism to begin its inquiry into the Bloomsbury rebellion is with that remarkable confession of categorical error which Keynes delivered to the Memoir Club in 1938 under the title, "My Early Beliefs." "We repudiated entirely customary morals, conventions and traditional wisdom," Keynes wrote.

> We were, that is to say, in the strict sense of the term, immoralists. The consequences of being found out had, of course, to be considered for what they were worth. But we recognized no moral obligation on us, no inner sanction, to conform or to obey. Before heaven we claimed to be our own judge in our own case . . . . It resulted in a general, widespread, though partly covert, suspicion affecting ourselves, our motives and our behavior. This suspicion still persists to a certain extent, and it always will. It has deeply coloured the course of our lives in relation to the outside world. It is, I now think, a justifiable suspicion.

Keynes was not announcing his conversion to a new faith, to be sure. "Yet so far as I am concerned, it is too late to change," he observed. "I remain, and always will remain, an immoralist." Yet he had come to understand very clearly the implications of the moral rebellion that he had helped to set on its course.

> . . . we repudiated [he continued] all versions of the doctrine of original sin, of there being insane and irrational springs of wickedness in most men. We were not aware that civilization was a thin and precarious crust erected by the personality and the will of a very few, and only maintained by rules and conventions skillfully put across and guilefully preserved. We had no respect for traditional wisdom or the restraints of custom. We lacked reverence, as [D. H.] Lawrence observed and as Ludwig [Wittgenstein] with justice also used to say—for everything and everyone. It did not occur to us to respect the extraordinary accomplishment of our predecessors in the ordering of life (as it now seems to me to have been) or the elaborate framework which they had devised to protect this order . . . . As cause and consequence of our general state of mind we completely misunderstood human nature, including our own. The rationality which we attributed to it led to a superficiality, not only of judgment, but also of feeling . . . . I fancy we used in the old days to get around the rich variety of experience by expanding illegitimately the field of aesthetic appreciation (we would deal, for example, with all branches of the tragic emotion under this head), classifying as aesthetic experience what is really human experience and somehow sterilising it by this mis-classification.

It is only when criticism can bring itself to take up the issues which Keynes so cogently defined some forty-five years ago that we shall come to a true understanding of the Bloomsbury phenomenon. Until then the biographers will continue to ply their wares, concentrating on ever more minor and peripheral figures, and the making of idols will go on unabated.

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Julian Schnabel paints a portrait of God

by Suzi Gablik

During 1982 Julian Schnabel was the most talked about artist in New York. In that one year, he had eight solo exhibitions and was included in twenty-two group shows, and there were no less than four pages of bibliographic references for his work. It became impossible in certain circles to attend a dinner party where Schnabel was not the center of conversation. Everybody, it seemed, was asking everybody, in an effort to get at the heart of the matter, "What do *you* think about Julian Schnabel?" Meanwhile, like some storybook prince with sunset-colored hair, the artist himself stood poised on the edge of his own spectacular success. Paintings that in 1977 had sold for $3,000 were now alleged to be worth upwards of $60,000. To the Brooklyn-born Schnabel, who had arrived in New York in 1973 fresh from the University of Houston, it must have seemed as if his ambition to become "the greatest artist in the world" might even be fulfilled before the age of thirty.

When a mini-retrospective of his work was mounted at the Tate Gallery in London in the summer of '82, the English art world grew similarly agitated. There was a curious sense on opening night as if the Queen of Sheba or some other great figure out of history had put in an appearance. The truth is that a certain narcissistic drama has surrounded the whole enterprise of Schnabel's meteoric career, to a point which transcends all responses to his work and which has made even his admirers uneasy. If, as many people believe, Schnabel is truly a tuning fork for our postmodern times, why does the mere mention of his name set off so many unsympathetic vibrations?

"Schnabel," Robert Hughes has written in *Time,* "is immensely fashionable with collectors for reasons the work does not make clear." Surely a cultural world that for years now has been accustomed to old tires and stuffed goats as part of the normal vocabulary of painting cannot look with anything but aplomb upon the presence of broken plates and a few antlers hanging on the wall. Surely it is not the clutter of broken crockery that sets Schnabel's critics so much on edge, for, when you get down to it, these are not threatening pictures—not in the way that Lichtenstein's comic strips were threatening when they first appeared, or Frank Stella's all-black stripe paintings. These are not radical pictures; if anything, they seem to have an old-fashioned visionary core, the subject matter ranging at times from St. Francis in ecstasy to images of Christ on the Cross. Schnabel has even painted a portrait of God. Is it the inexplicable intrusion of religious subject matter that suggests, to those who are made uneasy by Schnabel's work, a shadowy, counterfeit practice? Or is it the artist himself that they are unwilling to endorse?

It would seem to be provocative, after several decades of self-referring abstract art, that a number of artists are re-introducing mythological and religious themes in their

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pictures. We can point also to the work of Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, and Mimmo Paladino. Are we to view this new trend as evidence of the artist's dissatisfaction with a closed secular world—as an authentic reaching out on their part for the sources of lost myths? Is Neo-Expressionism a true renaissance of sacramental vision, an attempt to reconstitute a world of archetypal symbols forgotten by our society and to bring back to light their meanings? Or is it just another demythologizing tactic of post-modernism, one more form of eclectic pastiche, that merely recycles metaphysically picturesque images into yet another new, salable genre? How can a critic, or anyone else for that matter, determine this? At this point, not unexpectedly, opinions are very mixed. Inveterate Conceptualists like Joseph Kosuth claim that Neo-Expressionism, and the whole revival of painting in general, is market-oriented and regressive; while others—the critic Donald Kuspit being perhaps the most incisive among them—believe that Neo-Expressionism (particularly its German axis) reinstates the power of imagination after the arid intellectualism of Conceptual art and the bankruptcy of late-modernist abstraction. What the new painting obliges us to decide is whether, in transferring their energies to vaguely religious characters and symbols, these artists are acting on whim, or out of stylistic necessity, or from a belief that art can have real mystical value again.

When, in the Renaissance, Michelangelo depicted God touching the hand of Adam, it was felt by everyone who saw it as a sacramental action; nor is it necessary to identify with any specific religion to experience the way this image "causes" grace, almost as if it were itself imbued with the hidden presence of God. The image hits one just where it counts. By contrast, the florid blue blob that constitutes Schnabel's portrait of God is like light transmitted through an opaque stone. Seen through the eyes of a spirituality that belongs to another state of culture than ours, it appears to have no depth to its spiritual consciousness—there seems more self-indulgence in it than visionary affirmation. If Neo-Expressionism indicates a genuine struggle to liberate the visionary powers—to reclaim for art those irrational components previously suppressed not only by Conceptual and Minimalist modes, but also by centuries of secularism—does it also aim to correct the spiritual imbalance in our culture? After all, if one believes in the world view of modern secularity, then it is naïve to accept the existence of a transcendent reality. And if there is no transcendent reality, then we are free to play with its symbols at will, irrespective of our prior convictions concerning the real and the divine. Symbols can be lifted out of their time and place, and plundered, as it were, for their picturesque qualities. But in the absence of any correspondence or loyalty to a transcendent reality, can such imagery have any symbolic value? In a society where religious faith no longer exists, can it be anything but banal and dysfunctional?

Schnabel, it would seem, has no particular feelings about God one way or the other—God is just another image to manipulate. Referring to one of his recent exhibitions, he explains, ". . . the paintings were all part of one state of consciousness. It had a chapel-like feeling. I wanted to have a feeling of God in it. Now I don't know if there's a God up there or anywhere . . . . Maybe I make paintings larger than I am so that I can step into them and they can massage me into a state of unspeakableness." As far as I can see, it would be a mistake to look for any visionary function on the part of these works, which seem to aim more at the artist's own emotion than at any communion with the divine. Schnabel's negative encounter with a world that has lost its divine presence seems to take it for granted that we have no proper standards for judging the spirituality of our times. What it tells us, instead, is just how much we have lost the very idea of God—how numb we have become to the experience of the sacred—and how the capacity to express religious truth seems outside the contemporary artist's horizon. Certainly, sacred symbols are doomed

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to make-believe and artifice in a society where their inner purpose has been suppressed and their forms deprived of any root meaning. And yet the paradox of Schnabel's art, and part of its hold on us, is the way it frequently does seem to aspire to a numinous dimension—which poses the question of the motives from which this art has been made. If no religious impulse informs Schnabel's art, what reasons can there be today for painting St. Francis, Christ, and God?

I wrote to Julian Schnabel to ask him this, but there was no reply. The reason may be found—perhaps—in a comment by the critic Carter Ratcliff, who wrote in *Art in America* about the mythological overtones of Sandro Chia's imagery that "the conventions of iconography are bearable in our era so long as the artist retains his privilege of confounding them. This leaves each member of the audience alone with his responsibility to speculate, to see what he can see." One of the tyrannies of the secular world view, and the penetration of rationalism into all spheres of life, is that it has become virtually impossible to raise serious questions about the existence of God, or any transcendent realm. We have learned not only to disapprove, but also to ridicule, the significance of the sacred, and to trivialize spiritual themes in which we "can no longer" believe. This loss of symbolic resonance is the peculiar degeneration of consciousness from which we suffer as a culture, and it both defines and limits the conditions of our existence. "One can be quite sure," writes Elizabeth Baker, the editor of *Art in America,* "that the iconographical nuances of much recent Neo-Expressionist painting are often no more specific in their meaning to the artist than the viewer. Nor need these artists be indicted for such an attitude." Another critic, writing in *Flash Art* about Mimmo Paladino's work, claims in a similar vein that although Paladino's paintings are filled with mythological symbols, any attempt to analyze them fails, since the signs are disconnected from any source and therefore only represent themselves. And as for the supposed religious overtones of the new art, one of its main supporters and promoters, the critic and curator Diego Cortez, commented recently in *Arts*: ". . . I hate religious art. I wish it would disappear once and for all."

If Neo-Expressionist works are indeed immune to interpretation, being filled with a symbolic content that proposes not to signify, it is difficult to see how they pose a challenge to, or reverse the trend of, formalism, as has been claimed. Rather, they seem to extend the formalist mode, by creating yet another aesthetic style whose primary meaning seems to be that of shifting around parameters in the art world. Beyond this, the ultimate ground of their truth and the basis of their conviction remains unclear. Not embedded in any enduring beliefs or practices, locked out from any ultimate meaning, they can only float, gargantuan and occluded, through the spiritual vacuum created by our culture, emancipated from all conviction. Schnabel claims his paintings allude to some kind of power—the power of primitive, magical things—but you can't attach some broken plates and a pair of antlers to a canvas, hand it over to Mary Boone to sell, and hope for mythic significance. The essential inner attitude is missing—the devotional frame of mind. In addressing this issue, of the way signs of ultimate meaning in our culture are devalued to objects of transitory and commercial interest, it seems to me that we are really addressing a much larger theme: the failure, in our secularized age, of the moral and religious impulse, and a serious disturbance in man's relationship to God.

For nearly all of human history, the world was enchanted. As material and rationalist values have gained pre-eminence, however, spiritual values have declined in direct proportion. Once uprooted from the world of symbols, art lost its links with myth and sacramental vision. The kind of sacramental vision to which I am referring is not that of routine church-going or religious dogma as such, but a mode of perception which converges on the power of the divine. It is what Theodore Roszak has called "The Old Gnosis," a visionary style of knowledge, as

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distinct from a theological or a factual one, that is able to "see" the divine in the human, the infinite in the finite, the spiritual in the material. This sacramental vision, which underlies our perception of the Absolute, can never be completely uprooted, according to Mircea Eliade; it can only be debased. However much we ignore, camouflage, or degrade art's "sacred elements," they still survive in the unconscious. Indeed, the recalling and setting up of sacred signs is the even more urgent task of an artist in times estranged from symbol and sacrament. Before art can be *successfully* remythologized, however, we must, as a society, suspend our unbelief. This means breaking through the terrible limitations of modern secularism.

Traditionally, artists have used art as a material means of reaching spiritual ends. Many sociologists have pointed to the fact that there is no known human society without some conception of a supernatural order, or of mystical forces governing ordinary events. Only modern Western society has taken it upon itself to discredit the mystical, believing that such "baggage" ought to be dispensed with, and that rational man should "face reality" without any superstition; but this attitude is in no way true of the original human condition. Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and Alexis de Tocqueville all maintained that the religious impulse, far from being mere superstructure or illusion (as Marx and Freud claimed), is functionally necessary to society, and is, moreover, an indispensable mechanism of integration. "Men cannot abandon their religious faith," Tocqueville wrote, "without a kind of aberration of intellect and a sort of violation of their true nature . . . . Unbelief is an accident, and faith is the only permanent state of mankind."

Among those who see transcendence as a necessary constituent of human life (and secularism as a dehumanizing aberration) are the contemporary sociologists Robert Nisbet and Peter Berger, for whom the decline of the sacred in human affairs is the most traumatic change man has experienced since the beginnings of settled culture in the Neolithic Age. Freud may have rejected religion as a neurotic illusion, judging the world of myth and magic negatively as errors to be refuted and supplanted by science, but as illusions they have been positive and life-supporting, providing civilizations with their cohesion, vitality, and creative powers; and where they have been dispelled, there has been a loss of equilibrium and uncertainty—nothing to hold on to. In refusing to acknowledge the reality of any experience that is not scientifically provable, the scientific world view has condemned much that is vital to culture and creative growth. To see things in this alienating way may be the particular compulsion of the modern Western mentality, but it does not necessarily reflect the way things really are. Although we may value technological power more than sacred wisdom, scientific rationalism has so far failed to prove itself as a successful integrating mythology for industrial society; it offers no inner archetypal mediators of divine power, no cosmic connectedness, no sense of belonging to a larger pattern. Science, in the twentieth century, has had little to say about spiritual values, nor, it would seem, has art.

In primitive spiritual cosmology, power comes from the mysterious forces of the cosmos. Art was a form of mediation, a means of establishing contact with this spirit world and participating in its creative energies. For the individual, the sacred was something emphatically other than himself, its power transmitted from a pool of ancestors and spirits to which the individual gave his allegiance, and which in turn gave his life the only abiding significance it can have. Man found his own truth by recognizing that he cannot, with any meaning, live out of himself alone. Our own secular ideology has led us to eclipse this sacred dimension—the sense of participation in a timeless reality—and to pursue immortality through the individual's own acts and works. Hubris means forgetting where the real source of power lies, and imagining, as we now do, that it is in oneself.

In modernist culture, nothing is sacred.

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We now live in a world that is constantly more managerialized and power-hungry, but with considerable confusion as to where the power really lies. This confusion reached fairly ludicrous proportions recently in the chicken-and-egg situation which developed over the difficulty of determining exactly who is responsible for Julian Schnabel's huge success. Some magazines have presented him as the "protégé" of his dealer, Mary Boone, who, as it happens, received more publicity during the last year than any of her artists, having been written up in *New York* magazine, *Life, Esquire, Saturday Review, Savvy,* and *People.* Being described as Mary Boone's protégé, however, enrages Schnabel, who was quoted in *Art News* as stating that "Basically, she is known because of me. I think Mary is famous because Leo [Castelli] is famous. But what artist is really famous," he adds, "compared with Burt Reynolds?" "I cannot make an artist if he does not have the proper qualities," Leo Castelli comments, in *New York* magazine. "But I can do it better. Mary and I. We can make an artist charismatic."

Charismatic power cannot come to anyone except from his innermost being, through the resonance of his belief in his task. At this point it has become virtually impossible to balance out the simple expression of the individual against its full-scale commercial manipulation and exploitation in the art world. Belonging to a prestigious gallery that competes for the artist on the market means that all esteem earned in this way is doomed to remain equivocal. There will always be uneasiness over the significance of any success where the claims of merit are derived from power blocs seeking to secure their own dominant interest. The paradoxical nature of contemporary moral experience has been well demonstrated by Alasdair MacIntyre, in his study of moral theory, *After Virtue.* MacIntyre argues that each of us is taught to see ourself as an autonomous moral agent, but each of us also becomes engaged in modes of practice which involve manipulative relationships with others. Seeking to protect the autonomy that we have learned to prize, we aspire *not* to be manipulated by others; but in the world of practice we find no way open to us to embody our own principles except through those very modes of manipulation that each of us aspires to resist in our own case.

A market atmosphere, with its constant demands for something new, is highly unfavorable to the creation of authentic and permanent values. The form of a producer-consumer society has made the world into an enclosed world: nothing exists outside it. Its ends are to be found within itself. When this tendency becomes monopolistic, it drives out all others, and a peculiar false life, which now seems the most "natural" thing in the world to us, begins to grow at the expense of a more valid life. The situation is so extreme at this point that, in MacIntyre's view, belief in managerial expertise has all but replaced belief in God in our culture, and we no longer seem to have any justifications for authority that are not bureaucratic and managerial in form. Modern mass culture has tried very hard to avoid the moral and spiritual aspects of human living, and affluence has become the successful alternative to religious renewal.

Our own era seems to be producing increasing numbers of artists who are content to receive their stamp exclusively from the power apparatus of the New York art world, and who, in their mode of life, reproduce the ideology of the society that molded them. Adapted to and perfectly at home in the system, they understand the language of these conditions and how to handle them; the world does not impose on them any mission beyond the realization of their own professional aims. In the life of a professional, there are no ultimate concerns, only present ones. The world is perceived as an arena for the achievement of one's own success and satisfaction; there is no struggle to realize ethical values. And to the extent that art itself has lapsed into this function—of primarily serving the career interests of artists and their dealers—it has come to lack what used to be its unquestionable moral substance, its link with intrinsic value. To

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the extent that an artist seeks only personal objectives, personal satisfaction, and self-aggrandizement, we cannot say that he fulfills any moral obligation.

According to the sociologist Émile Durkheim, there are no genuinely moral ends except collective ones; behavior, whatever it may be, directed exclusively toward the personal ends of the individual does not have moral value. Moral goals involve something other than individuals: their object is society. Morality is threatened, therefore, when individualism comes to play an excessive part in the life of a society, subordinating everything else. Individualism destroys that complex equilibrium within a society whose various elements limit one another—since from the standpoint of liberal, individualist modernity, society is simply an arena in which individuals are free to pursue what is useful or agreeable to them. Certainly, much time has been spent during recent decades in denying that art has anything to do with either spiritual or ethical values. Its purely aesthetic purpose was re-emphasized recently by Clement Greenberg, at a conference on culture at the University of British Columbia. "It is barbarism, as Thomas Mann once said, to take aesthetic values and introduce them into questions of morality . . . . I have never felt that morality should in any sense be affected by the aesthetic factor . . . . I don't see art as having ever, in a real sense, affected the course of human affairs," he stated.

Many of our artists, suffering the repercussions of this desacralized mentality, have pretended for some time now that painting is merely a way of solving formal problems. The total opposition between art and life that formalism proposes exempts art from its moral tasks. "What is of importance in painting is paint," Jules Olitski declares; and in the same way, Kenneth Noland states, "It's all color and surface, that's all." Conspicuously missing in this "demystified" art is the mediation between God and man that has been present in art for most of its history until now. This is one of the things that makes recent modern art a thing for which there is, on the whole, no historical analogy: this act of the will which consists in man's shutting himself off against any "higher reality," or divine life. The very conception has largely been lost to artists in the late twentieth century.

In a sense, Schnabel's desire (along with other Neo-Expressionists') to reinstate subject matter of a mythic and symbolic kind, and even to draw on traditional religious iconography, ought to be a corrective breath of fresh air, after so much reductive abstraction. And in many ways, it is: the mystical world view that emerges from many of these pictures strikes a lot of people as right. On the other hand, it is difficult to believe in the prophetic consciousness of someone so frankly out to get what he wants—personal success in the New York art world, not metaphysical truths. Culture-bound artists are likely to be content with the situation as they have found it, not objecting too much to the competitive demands of a system which they view pragmatically as promoting their own best interests. But an artist in today's world who believes that everything is in order, as long as the power apparatus continues to serve him well—who trusts the world as it now is—does not need to be equipped with moral courage. Merging himself successfully with the coming and going of the contemporary scene, having no will but that of realizing himself in his career, he can abstain from any criticism of it, because he is indifferent to what sort of future he is helping to bring about.

It is at this point that I should like, baldly, to pose a question: can we study art for moral results as we already study it for social and aesthetic ones? I am convinced not only that we can, but that we must—that the social, the aesthetic, and the moral are inextricably intertwined, and that we have absolved ourselves of these vital connections at our own peril. Art is not value-free, as science tries so hard to be—it is motivated and purposive. When the question is one of moral worth, however, it is not the finished product which we see that concerns us, but the inward

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principles directing it, which we do not see. Questions of "ends" are really questions of values, signifying the basis upon which an individual will choose one course of action rather than another. We infer these values—since we cannot know them directly—from their expression in behavior. Moral philosophy offers a partial analysis of the relationship of an individual to his motives and intentions, and the intended (or unintended) consequences of his actions. The Machiavellian, for instance, does things to attain ends he never mentions or actually denies, while professing other ends which he wants everyone to believe.

The word "end," of course, can mean either an aim being openly pursued, or an end incidentally achieved. Is making money, and becoming a success, a primary or an incidental function of making art? If this distinction seems irrelevant, it is only because our unwillingness to consider the gap between our consciously intended goals and the mode of life now necessary to achieve them has brought about a situation in which art is ceasing to serve the values it once did, and is beginning to serve other values not originally connected with its ends. For this state of affairs, however, we tend to blame conditions, not individuals. The Kafkaesque quality of bureaucratically structured existence is that things are done but no one is answerable for them. Unless we come to see this fact in some detail and clarity, we shall be unable to appreciate the true crisis of art in our time, or to reverse our present tendencies. Every artist today finds himself increasingly enveloped by a cultural system that makes up his destiny and requires that he act in certain ways, predetermining in crucial ways his relationship to things. More and more he finds, following the spirit of the times, that he needs to "go along to get along." Decisions become a professional rather than a moral affair. It is not difficult to see that the same situation comes into view quite differently, depending on which of these relevance structures—professionalism or ethics—is applied to it. Professionalism offers a shortcut—an easy way out of moral dilemmas—because it artificially insulates the process of decision-making against the influence of more than one type of factor. Manipulating strategic factors in the environment in order to promote careers and products successfully becomes what matters. Success is operational; any means may be used for achieving it. When bureaucratic claims and demands take precedence, the authority of morality is diminished, and its purposes in varying degrees frustrated. Everyone is reduced to being a reflex in the system.

What if we believe that *however* we act at this point, the results will be the same—that individual actions are quite helpless against the entrenched bureaucratic models of our culture? Are we then justified in doing nothing? Obviously, no single individual is responsible for a social situation he finds himself in if nothing he could have done would have prevented it. But he may be responsible for not trying. The assumption that my action will be useless does not absolve me of responsibility for the actions I might have taken but didn't. An individual who feels uneasy about the events surrounding him but becomes paralyzed and unable to act is more responsible for the continuation of those events than the person who struggles to improve them and fails. The first step in breaking the hypnosis under which we are living is to develop the willingness to acknowledge that we are *all* a cause in this matter. When we view our actions merely as part of the general course of events, it seems impossible to attribute the events to individuals. But each individual is a tiny wheel with a fractional share in the decision that *no one effectively decides*. This, it seems to me, is the central problem of responsibility: that we are all responsible for the events of this world in terms of our own actions, even though it is not possible to relate these events to ourselves causally in a definite and clear manner.

What I have been trying to argue is that the artist has a basic choice as to whether or not he is to be a moral agent. Morality depends on choice—on deriving the ends we

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seek, and the means we use, from a consistent set of values. In those situations where conflicting interests come together, unless we find the right means to the goal, the "good" that we seek escapes us. Moral ideals of what is "good" are implicit in our way of life; they set limits to the ways and means by which we conduct our lives; they condition our sense of right and wrong, and underlie our criteria of success. If this inner commitment to moral value is present and vital, it will assert and transmit itself.

As Hannah Arendt pointed out, whenever true authority existed, it was always joined with responsibility for the course of things in the world. The solitary shaman does not exist simply for his or her own benefit. It is precisely this exalted conception of the artist's mission that gives art its authority—the conception he has of his work, and the moral ideal to which he is committed. One of the more worrying side effects of modernism's posture of estrangement has been the generalized refusal on the part of artists to assume responsibility for the course of things in the world. As a society of "professionals," we have no objects of dedication except a specialized pursuit. Arendt speaks of the "sad opaqueness" of a private life centered on nothing but itself. Authority, she states, gave the world permanence and durability, which human beings need. Its loss is tantamount to the loss of the groundwork of the world. A consumer's society cannot possibly know how to take care of a world, because its central attitude to all objects, including art—the attitude of consumption—spells ruin to everything it touches.

So what are we to do? Obviously, we do not all agree on moral principles and on particular obligations, even if we are all more or less resigned to the business of earning a living. Does this mean, then, that basic practical conflicts have no ethical solution? Obviously, as F. Scott Fitzgerald used to say, the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function. The subject of ethics has its *longueurs,* and sometimes it strikes people that—were I to have it my way—worldly failure is the only sign of virtue which can possibly keep the ideals of the profession from fading at this point. And if it can't be done, Gertrude Stein once nearly said, why insist on trying to do it? Why spend time shooting at pendulums?

Because, after all is said and done, moral pursuits are unlikely to advance anyone's career today, and will only produce a conflict of values which cannot be resolved, given the general state of affairs. Since everything suggests the continuation of these trends, how can we keep ourselves from becoming gifted functionaries of the system on the one hand, while still managing not to starve to death on the other? Unfortunately, these mortal questions cannot be solved; they can only be faced. But the fact that there is not a clear set of priorities for settling them in no way frees us to abandon the problem. All that can be said is that there are two obvious dangers to be avoided.

One is the danger of defeatism—succumbing to the feeling of powerlessness that makes it seem as if we are being dragged along in the wake of a system we cannot hope to challenge. The second is the danger of eliminating as irrelevant all moral considerations that cannot be brought within the scope of pragmatic careerism. In today's complex world, the kinds of value that motivate us are often contradictory. They will not combine readily into an easy solution determining what we should do. But the seeming impossibility of complying with these contrary demands has led us to evade them, in many cases, altogether. Ambiguously alluring is the possibility of setting oneself against the world, turning away from it and avoiding its reality—as many of the early modernists did. Their remoteness from the world gave them an inward distinction. The social situation of today, however, compels immersion: retreatism and rebellion at this point are as unsatisfactory as submission and conformity. The romantic outsider, discordant with everything, will not be adequate to the

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task. Resistance remains essentially negative unless it leads the self beyond a mere posture of defiance. Every artist must fight on behalf of his own essence, but without that Pavlovian hunger for reputation which, as Rhett Butler once told Scarlett O'Hara, is something people with courage can live without. Only a personal self able to resist the tyranny of the world by standing in ethical personal relationship to it will stand a chance of holding out against the imperatives of the bureaucratic environment. Through our choices, we can move our world and our existence from a position of moral ambiguity to one of clarity. But to be in any sense effective, we must proceed in conjunction with the system and strive for rescue, even while we are enmeshed in it.

The potential for rescue, however, hangs neither upon luck nor wishful thinking. It hangs upon acquiring an ethical outlook, in the face of the whole world, that will allow us to see that our decisions and acts have influence. We are the stewards, not the victims, of our circumstances. The first sign of awakening in the individual is that he or she will manifest a new way of holding oneself toward the world. Not engaging in society's power games becomes a kind of natural power that can have a positive, contagious effect on other people, just as if a spark were leaping from one to the other. This was what Gandhi referred to as "soul force" or "truth force"—the recognition that we can take back for ourselves the power we have given others. Buddha said to stop being identified with material things—because what gets your attention gets you. If you give your attention to the external power structure, then it is going to control you, and that is not where the control should be. If we do not pursue this path on our own initiative, however—of finding a place in the world without selling our souls to it—there is nothing left for us but shipwreck, or the self-willed enjoyment of life amid the coercions of an apparatus against which we no longer strive.

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The secret Kafka

by Stephen Koch

It has been a century since Franz Kafka was born, and well over half a century since he died and his work began to slip into the mainstream of literature. It is an oddity of his reputation that among all the great modernists of fiction to appear during the first half of this century, Franz Kafka—mute, modest latecomer—came into his greatness, as it were, last. He lived and wrote during modernism's high halcyon decades, outliving Proust by only a little over two years; he was being read with interest in Germany before *Ulysses* had been published in the United States, and, in fact, much of his greatest work had already been written while Joyce and Proust were still in the early stages of their art.

Yet the true emergence of Franz Kafka—outside Germany, at least, and to a certain degree within it—is an essentially postwar development. An entire generation of English-speaking readers had long since grown up and worn out their copies of *Ulysses* and *Remembrance of Things Past* and *Death in Venice* when Hannah Arendt began to hector her unenlightened American friends with the idea that Kafka was a greater—oh, *much* greater—writer than Thomas Mann. (At the time, Mann was a ubiquitous eminence: *the* German writer to all good Americans. This must have been especially tiresome to Arendt, a German émigré.) Yet Arendt was not entirely alone in her invidious comparison of Mann with Kafka. One who agreed was Thomas Mann's own sometime son-in-law, W. H. Auden ("Who's *the* most boring German writer? My father-in-law!"). During the Fifties, Auden would become in some ways Kafka's exemplary reader among English-speaking intellectuals. Auden defined the classic interest of Kafka for intellectuals of the period: an ethic and aesthetic of ambiguity; a genuinely modern understanding of neurosis (mixed with the polemics of Freudian revisionism); a yearning, rather than defiant, relation to religious crisis; and a preoccupation with totalitarianism. These same concerns paved the way for Kafka's emergence in postwar, "existentialist" France. Kafka had been known there, vaguely, for almost twenty years before he became *needed*. His greatest French reader, Maurice Blanchot, first mentions Kafka in 1943, and does not turn his full attention to him until 1948.[1]

And so Kafka—with his dying request not to be published at all—had to wait. *The Trial* appeared in German less than a year after *The Magic Mountain* was published. One of the more interesting utterances in Mann's novel (which not even ten thousand humanities courses can kill) is the prophesy that so bewilders Hans Castorp. Naphta, the immobilized, hypochondriacal Jewish Jesuit

1 There is a surprising communality between Auden's key essay on Kafka, "The I Without a Self," and Blanchot's responses to Kafka during the same period—"Kafka and Literature," for example, in *La Part du Feu*.

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strikes out at his adversary, Settembrini, the immobilized, hypochondriacal humanist:

> "No," Naphta went on. "Liberation and the development of the individual are not the key to our age, they are not what the age demands. What it needs, what it wrestles after, what it will create—is Terror."
>
> He uttered the last word lower than the rest, without a motion of his body. Only his eyeglasses suddenly flashed.

There is a sense in which Kafka's greatness could not become fully visible until this prophecy had been fulfilled. But fulfilled it was. What once had been mistaken by some as merely interesting bric-a-brac from expressionist Weimar assumed new centrality in the high culture that was being seared by Naphta's Terror. I myself do not see Kafka's interest as primarily political, but there is no doubt that it was history that made him canonical. He was an artist whose time had come, and his effect on the best postwar critical thinking—Auden and Blanchot are ideal examples—was far deeper and more transforming intellectually than that of any other of the great modernists, the much abused Herr Mann included. And it is still true that to read Kafka at all well means you will never *think* in quite the same way again.

Yet Kafka remains—especially in the English-speaking world—anomalous, singular even in his greatness. I cannot think of any writer of the first rank in English who can rightly be called his heir as an artist—not one in whom one can see a whole vision made possible through his influence, as one can see, let's say, Faulkner's vision unfold after his youthful encounter with James Joyce. The story is different of course in Germany and the Eastern European countries, where a certain numb academicism seems to have been founded on Kafka's manner. A fair amount of new work coming from those regions reads, at least to me, like Kafka canned. An example is Milan Kundera. Kundera is an interesting writer, but instead of being the formal innovator he's proclaimed to be, he seems to be derived—obviously, and none too searchingly—from second-generation Kafka. Fair enough. For all too obvious reasons, the Eastern Europeans have borrowed from Kafka a politicized vocabulary of hopelessness, a ghastly language of false hope, bureaucratized consciousness, impossible alternatives, paradoxes, and choicelessness.

In the West, on the other hand, a newer generation's interest in Kafka has focused on a different kind of hope. Kafka is not a realist; he is in fact the only figure in modernist fiction's high pantheon who is not. Inevitably, he has special importance for those who are looking for an aesthetic that might escape the overwhelming gravitational field of Flaubertian realism: think only of his role for Borges or Calvino. Yet something in Kafka resists these postmodern raids on his solitude. Of all the great modernists, Kafka is least the reporter, least concerned with other people and the real terrain of the big world out there. The one we all see. He is the modernist who owes the least to "life." To put it another way, he is the one least indebted to Flaubert and the Flaubertian encounter between self and other, that visionary naming of the real which has been the high task of most modernist fiction, since it was performed with such definitive power in *Madame Bovary*.

Kafka's encounter with reality, with "life," with "the" world, took forms quite particular to himself. Yet, just as with Flaubert, it was precisely a critical encounter with "life"—life in the form of a woman—that precipitated the moment when the novelist came into full possession of his art. The crisis had to do, naturally, with love.

It seems to me that even Elias Canetti, in his greatly admired essay "Kafka's Other Trial," does not sufficiently emphasize the degree to which the pre-eminent and defining experience in Kafka's life during his late twenties and early thirties—namely, his falling in love with Felice Bauer—was an experience that became not merely intimately connected to his writing, but an aspect *of* it. The relationship was in a sense more an en-

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counter with writing than with a real woman.

"I am able to enjoy human relationships," Kafka wrote, "but not to experience them." In fact, his relationship with Felice was almost exclusively epistolary. It is not easy to unearth in the biographical record a single hour during the very few days Kafka actually spent in company with the real woman that was not plainly unhappy. In a sense, the entire relationship was written rather than experienced, and its great moments of joy were not shared moments but private, even secret, moments. One such moment was the ecstasy—there is no other word for it—in which, on the night of September 22, 1912, Kafka once and for all discovered himself as an artist, writing "The Judgment" in one luminous sitting. That moment occurred just three nights after he initiated his correspondence with Felice with a love letter (and a nervy one at that, coming from a close-to-complete stranger) reminding her of their one and only meeting and of her obviously casual promise—made, one wonders, in what tone of voice—to travel with him one day to Palestine. Reading this document, one is simply astonished by the sometimes wild daring of the deeply shy. You may not remember me, it says; but I love you, it plainly implies. Meanwhile, we must begin to plan our trip to Palestine immediately, at once, now. The ecstasy that followed his writing this letter led Kafka directly to writing both "The Judgment" and "The Metamorphosis," and, of course, with those events began the true career of Franz Kafka.

So it was the encounter with Felice and with the "life" she represented—that is, married life—that brought Kafka into possession of his art. Kafka being Kafka, it took him no time to set up an ever more elaborate opposition between this "promised" life and the art it had helped to bring into existence. For the next two years, in what seem like numberless letters, Kafka would complicate the choice he felt he had to make between his writing and marriage. Once it seemed that choice had been made (that is, after their first and most important break-up in 1914), Kafka would refer to his "bachelorhood"—more often, his "ridiculous bachelorhood"—as if it were the *mot juste* for his condition as an artist. What Felice Bauer perhaps never fully understood about this endlessly discussed choice between life and art was the degree (I almost said the appalling degree) to which all Felice ever really represented to Kafka was more prose. To be sure, the art that beckoned him away from marriage with Felice was writing. But so was his relationship with her: that too was writing. Kafka did not lack love for the real Felice, or passion, or even an understanding of her dilemma. But theirs was not a relationship that could ever have sustained itself in plain dailiness, in talk that was not writing, or in the real contact of real flesh. It could not have survived, in short, what most people, Kafka included, call reality.

It is now well known how, once "The Metamorphosis" was safely complete, this epistolary affair and the marriage engagement it so tortuously led to reached its crisis in the "tribunal" (the word is Kafka's own) so brilliantly analyzed by Canetti. On July 12, 1914, Felice, finally breaking under Kafka's interminable, soul-squelching invention of obstacles, gathered her family and friend Grete Bloch as witnesses in the hotel Askanische Hof in Berlin. In one of her rare face-to-face meetings with Kafka, she laid out her reasons for ending their engagement. Precisely what Felice said that day is not completely clear. It does seem clear that the rupture was not occasioned by any knowledge of Kafka's guilty secret—that in his perversity he had become infatuated with Felice's friend Grete Bloch—but rather by Kafka's withdrawal. At long last she succumbed to all the doubts that Kafka, in his endless exploration of futility, had engendered and cultivated with such ingenious care. In any case, the encounter was hostile. It consisted of Felice listing—it was really a list of charges—reasons for a rupture, while Kafka (Grete Bloch sitting nearby) acceded in near silence. By the time they left the hotel that day, it seemed the engagement was over. Nineteen days later, the First World War

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began. Two weeks after that, noting in his diary "the feeling that my regular, empty, mad bachelor's life has some justification," Kafka began writing *The Trial.*

Now, if it can be said that *The Trial* had its initiating moment in a tribunal arbitrating what Kafka saw as a choice between life and art, it must also be said that there never was any *real* choice. None at all. It is true, of course, that from the very beginning Kafka *understood* his love for Felice as a choice for life, and, as such, something he pursued at the expense of his art. In an eloquent letter written later, he would write: "You see, you were not only the greatest friend, but at the same time the greatest enemy of my work. Though fundamentally it loved you beyond measure, equally it had to resist you with all its might for the sake of self-preservation." But if in fact Felice represented life, that representation was an invention of Kafka's, a life of words, and her eventual defeat at Kafka's hands was a literary event in which Kafka had collaborated from the beginning.

"One must never cheat anyone," Kafka wrote in his most famous aphorism. "Not even the world of its triumph." What are we to make of this remark, if it was Felice—and for that matter Grete Bloch and later in her different way Milena Jasenska-Polok—who represented the world? In his diary of 1918, Kafka lists the reasons he gave himself against the marriage to Felice:

> I must be alone a great deal. What I have accomplished is only the result of being alone.
>
> I hate everything that does not relate to literature, conversations bore me (even when they relate to literature), to visit people bores me, the joys and sorrows of my relatives bore me to my soul. Conversation takes the importance, the seriousness, the truth out of everything I think.
>
> The fear of connection, of passing into the other. Then I'll never be alone again.

This is not the language of a man about to concede the world its triumph. Paradoxically, cheating the world of its triumph is precisely what Kafka did, and did moreover in a rigged trial in the Askanische Hof, by forcing Felice after endless epistolary manipulation to read out a rejection of which, in a sense, he, not she, was the true author. In any case, didn't Kafka at the least cheat the real Felice Bauer? After all, she was a real woman, not merely one alternative to his art. She *was* an alternative to his art, of course, but he invented her in that role, all the better to choose against her and for an art the very subject of which was renunciation.

Kafka invented her, I would suggest, and rejected her just as surely as Flaubert invented and rejected Louise Colet. (The two relationships, by the way, resemble each other in a number of interesting ways. There is an essay to be written on these two love affairs and their role in the history of the muse and in the characteristically modernist methods of using notions of sex to mediate what is called life and art, a passion for women who make the work possible through love-at-a-distance.) "Dearest," Kafka wrote Felice, in the midst of writing "The Metamorphosis" and *Amerika,* "whatever happens, I implore you, with hands raised in supplication, do not be jealous of my novel." One thinks of Louise Colet's consternation on arriving—actually *daring* to show up in person!—at Croisset after all those months of intimate and sometimes heavy-breathing letters, only to discover an irritated Flaubert barely willing to permit her to set foot on the property, let alone to meet *ma mère.* This is not the behavior of men making a true choice between "life" and "art." We are dealing with a figure, the literary figure, of such a choice.

A few days after writing the letter in which he proposed marriage with Felice, Kafka wrote in his diaries the following entry—in its hopefulness almost unique among his many passages of self-description, though it takes only a moment for the flash of power he glimpses here to be swallowed up again. In the company of his sisters, he wrote, he is "a completely different person than I am in

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the company of other people. Fearless, powerful, surprising, moved as I otherwise am only when I write. If through the intermediation of my wife I could be like that in the presence of everyone. But then would it not be at the expense of my writing? Not that! Not that!"

Life with Felice was a life not to be lived: that was its function from the beginning. One paradox attendant upon this unlived, yet desired, experience—and paradox was Kafka's favorite literary conceit, the trope of all his tragicomedy—is that among all the first-rank figures in the canon of the high modern, Kafka's life was the least public, the least visible, the least "interesting," and yet his life, as a life, has entered the modern consciousness more deeply than any other, and entered with an emblematic, definitive power not unlike that with which the lives of Byron or Keats entered the consciousness of the nineteenth century. Leave aside the work for a moment. As a man, as a myth, Kafka is present for many of us as, let's say, Thomas Mann or James Joyce is not. (It is interesting to note, in this connection, how profoundly photogenic this profoundly shy man was. Excepting Picasso and perhaps Virginia Woolf, he is the most photogenic great artist of the century.) His myth is in our language in several ways. Of course, we have all seen those landscapes of desolation and worked in those bureaucratic corridors that are rightly known as Kafkaesque. But more than that, Kafka's myth, for us, is an image of destiny, his life an emblem for destiny in its modernist figuration.

What is this destiny? It is the understanding by the neurotic of his collaboration in his own unhappiness, the deeply arresting discovery that unhappiness, or immobilization, or despair, has been *chosen,* chosen as an alternative, the *preferred* alternative. To what? Should we call it "life"? A fuller life in any case. The narrow compass of Kafka's life—its privacy, its unsuccess, the horrible consistency of its renunciations—combines with its tragic shortness to give it the coherence needed to linger permanently as an image of this dilemma.

And what of the fiction that came out of such renunciation? The mainstream source of modernist fiction is *Madame Bovary,* but Kafka's castle is undoubtedly located elsewhere. It is a modernist bad habit to overpraise originality, and it is possible to overestimate the degree of Kafka's originality. He probably owes more to the more ordinary varieties of expressionism and to the dream literature once regnant in Germany than we like to concede. Even so, it remains indisputable that, among the most select modernist company, Kafka stands apart—even as he did in life. Shy, always shy.

"*I* am Madame Bovary," Flaubert said. But he did not *want* to be Madame Bovary. Becoming Madame Bovary—indeed, concerning himself with her in any way—was a humiliation for him, as we know from Francis Steegmuller's *Flaubert and Madame Bovary.* Flaubert was brought to accept the task of writing *Madame Bovary* through a humiliating process of renunciation. He had hoped for something different. There is a sense in which what Flaubert wanted was to write like Franz Kafka. Having glimpsed the ecstatic mode through his epileptic seizures of 1843, Flaubert aspired to capture in words the truth of his interior illuminations, to deal somehow with the compelling landscape he had glimpsed within. He wished to be a solipsistic visionary. He spent years attempting to do so, composing *The Temptation of Saint Anthony.* He failed. We need only compare any of Kafka's great fictions to *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* to see how completely he failed.

Once he had failed, guided by the saving sanity of one good and true friend, Louis Bouilhet, Flaubert was able to bring himself to submit to that consolation prize, that loser's solution—the writing of *Madame Bovary.* Steegmuller shows how Flaubert came to his masterpiece through an experience of defeat: only then was he willing to give up his effort to serve his interior visions. He gave up and looked at the world, where he discovered—in the person of an adulterous, half-educated housewife—himself.

Kafka's experience of the other was very

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different. We might measure his distance from "the" world with a simple interpretive suggestion: that, without exception, every male figure found anywhere in the fiction of Franz Kafka written after his meeting with Felice Bauer is a figuration of himself. Whenever a male figure appears in his pages, he has been produced from the ego's repertory within, yet another figure in a single indecipherable dream. All: even the fatuous father who sentences Georg to death by drowning in "The Judgment"; even the peasant boy beside whom the country doctor lies down naked ("'Will you save me?' whispered the boy with a sob, quite blinded by the life within his wound"); even Klamm in his castle; even the overseer in whose arms the hunger artist dies, begging for forgiveness; even the crowd-pleasing young panther that replaces the defunct showman in his cage. The single exception is outside Kafka's fiction: his own father, addressed in the "Letter to my Father." The one, the only, masculine Other.

It seems to me that the whole of Kafka's comedy rests on these figurations of himself. They rescue his meditations on futility and depression from the terminal curse of self-pity, replacing it with a delicate game of powerlessness in an interplay with omnipotence that is at once dour and enchanting.

And what about Kafka's women? "*I* am Madame Bovary." What makes the line so striking of course is its brusque thrust across the sex line. It would be interesting to know what is currently thought of Max Brod's decision, while preparing the text of *The Trial* for publication, to replace the initials F. B.—they are of course Felice Bauer's initials—with the fully written out name of the character who figures as Felice in the novel: Fräulein Bürstner. In *Diaries,* Kafka—or should I call him K.?—used the same initials, F. B., as the emblem of his discretion, his diaristic secrecy, his hesitation—his timidity even—over brazenly writing out The Name. The female figures in Kafka's fiction are of that life, so desired and despised, that he "enjoyed" but could not "experience." Yet that distinction itself is a figure of his art, invented by Kafka and finally his: all the female figures in his art, as in his life, remain figures for that encounter with the Other that—it is the whole premise of his art—always fails.

It fails. Fails as Kafka failed. For he *did* fail. He failed Felice Bauer. He failed, tragically, Grete Bloch. He failed himself. He failed everyone except his art. Failure is in fact the minor key that is always more or less audible in the articulation of any art based upon the solipsism of the ecstatic mode. And despite his dreary, and at moments almost insufferable, encounters with depression and despair, the Kafka who discovered himself in one luminous night writing "The Judgment" is one of the great artists of the ecstatic. It is a strange, a new, ecstasy. It is palpable, and yet who is it that *feels* this ecstasy? Who experiences it? It is felt by none of the characters in his fiction. Neither was it felt by the Kafka who wrote all those hundreds of letters to Felice Bauer. God knows it was not the diarist who struggles and worries and suffers, at times so tiresomely, week after week, year after year. In fact, whatever figure experiences this ecstasy is not visible anywhere in the writing Kafka left behind. That figure is not even the man behind the writing. Look for him anywhere, and you will find him nowhere.

The figure—the uninscribed figure—who feels this ecstasy is the secret Kafka, a Kafka beyond words. Max Brod glimpsed him only briefly, during those weeks when he began writing to Felice, when he spoke of that trip to Palestine and began "The Metamorphosis." "Kafka is in ecstasy," Brod wrote, "working whole nights through." Two days later: "Kafka is in an unbelievable ecstasy." No, the secret Kafka appears nowhere in the writings, and yet, inexplicably—and it is the condition of inexplicability that is the ground of Kafka's true originality—that ecstasy is what we feel subtly on every page he wrote, and on his greatest pages we feel it as we do nowhere else in all of literature.

The failure that underwrites the ecstatic mode derives, I think, from its solipsism, that ecstatic solipsism of which Kafka is by

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far the greatest artist in all of modern fiction. It may be asked why failure should be so intimately linked with ecstasy. Kafka understands this better than anyone. It is a peculiarity of success—all success—that it is communal. Like language itself, success is nothing unless it is shared. There really is no place to have success except in the world—that world Kafka thought we should not cheat of its triumph.

Failure, on the other hand, is solitary. We fail alone. And when failure is finished with us, it leaves us alone. It leaves us in precisely that silent and solitary condition that is the arena for the secret Kafka's ecstasy and the whole ground of his great art.

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Painter-prince: the return of Anders Zorn

by Dan Hofstadter

Like his contemporary Captain Hook, Anders Zorn, also a sailing man, was never so daunting as when he grew excessively modest or polite. That is supposed to be the truest sign of breeding, but Anders had no breeding, in the usual sense, at all. During one of his trips to the United States, in October of 1900, *The Chicago Chronicle* related how a certain "Miss Newrich" had approached the "painter-prince" with the words, "Oh, Mr. Zorn, you come from Sweden, don't you? It is a great pleasure to meet you, all our better class of servants come from there." Anders, one gathers, merely bowed; but when he checked in at the Schenley in Pittsburgh and was queried as to his origins, he turned to his entourage and inquired, "Where *do* I come from?" Somebody suggested "Everywhere," but the escape was declined; Anders faced the clerk and said, "Nowhere."

It was the truth. Nowhere was Anders's hometown. But just as every family is very old if you look closely enough into the matter, so Nowhere has many more interesting people than Somewhere, if only because it is so much bigger. What is most compelling, even exemplary, in the strange life of Anders Zorn is his fidelity to a past that might have seemed, to anyone else in his place, only a dark receding sea of humiliation. He took everything in mythic stride, like a boy in seven-league boots, and ended by putting his own Nowhere very distinctly on the map.

Anders was a man of many maps. It was somewhere in the Strait of Messina, on his way to Cairo in 1912, that he tried to set down just what had happened during that trip to the Carnegie Institute twelve years before. He had traveled, had he not, via Berlin, where he'd painted a Miss Cohen; then on to Paris and Cherbourg, picking up a couple of his many American friends; then, as it seemed, on a transatlantic steamer, French Line, gleaming with marquetry and chrome, where he'd drawn from the model in a stateroom with a parlor and bath; and he quite clearly remembered a banner headline in *The New York Journal* announcing THE PRINCE OF ART IN THIS COUNTRY.

First came a stint as a juror for the forthcoming international exhibition at the Carnegie Galleries, where three of Anders's oil portraits were shown, including that of Grover Cleveland (with whom he'd once shared a bottle of Bourbon on the edge of the White House bathtub). Pictures by Eakins, Cassatt, Sargent, and Whistler were also displayed. Then he went on to Missouri for a lawsuit against Henry Clay Pierce of Water-Pierce Oil ("the nastiest stinking skunk that ever walked the streets of St. Louis"), then back to New York where Isabella Stewart Gardner presently swept in. They were already old friends and he called her "Mrs. Jack" (though her intimates called her "Belle"). They had met at the Chicago Exhibition of 1892, when Mrs. Gardner, all in black, had stopped before his *Omnibus*

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and asked, "I want it, can I buy it?" and he had answered yes. "Who is Zorn?" she pursued; "myself," he replied. "Yourself indeed!" she exclaimed. "Well I feel sure we shall soon be enemies . . . or else very, very fast friends. You shall come today for tea." And of course he had painted her, in an extravagant pose, though she had the complexion of smoked salmon and was liberally dashed with freckles. This year, 1900, there was a whole new batch of likenesses to be done, including Colonel Daniel Lamont, vice-president of the Northern Pacific Railway and a crony of Cleveland's, and Grant Barney Schley of the Wall Street firm of Moore & Schley, whose son had once defenestrated a waiter for caddishness, and who speculated—successfully—for Anders with his portrait fee. On the top floor of the Madison Square Garden Tower he dined upon tortoise with Stanford White in the latter's rooms, which were decorated with undreamt-of luxe. And at the Players Club—for Anders was a devout clubman—he invited Mark Twain over to his table, regretting only that he, Zorn, had nicotine poisoning. "Then I would give up smoking altogether," said the American. "But I cannot afford to give it up," the Swede replied, "it is my dearest vice." "Why, then I would turn a confounded smoker," said Twain. Such was the tone of this, the fifth of Anders's eight trips to our country: all whiskey, women, and geezers in three-piece suits. He liked the Americans. "Their frank, straightforward manner suits my nature. I've never really been able to stand our European cityfolks' ceremonious ways and artificial customs . . . . Over there when they say, 'He is all right,' all doors open to the foreigner, which Europeans cannot understand." The Americans in return liked Anders. He seemed to many a Horatio Alger of the paintbrush, a genial swashbuckler of the international broad-brush style who surely matched, if he did not surpass, his rivals Sargent, Sorolla, and Boldini.

Hearing Anders's description of our easy-going ways, an astute observer might suspect that at some time, way back, he himself had not been quite "all right" in fussy old Europe. The suspicion would be justified: Anders Zorn had started out all wrong. He had been born between two cows not far from Mora, a little town in the province of Dalarna in central Sweden, and he was what was called an *oäkting*. This is one of the unloveliest words in the Swedish language, so unlovely in fact that it has been banned from official usage. An *oäkting*, in the word's precise sense, was not only an "illegitimate" child, he was also a "fake" child, as a coin or signature may be fake. A dark destiny usually awaited such "fake" children, who had much the value of play money at a dry-goods store; drunkenness, untended chronic illness, hunger, and petty crime were rife in the Swedish countryside of the 1860s. "My first dim memory is of lying sucking in another woman's arms, not my mother's," Anders recalled.

> Then I remember sitting in the hearth and weeping: the neighbor's sleigh was waiting outside to take my mother across Lake Siljan to Falun. She was going to work at a brewery in Uppsala . . . . I also learned that when my mother's people heard of her shame, my maternal grandfather journeyed to Uppsala, where she'd been working, and showed her great kindness, and got her to come home with him . . . . Early I learned to be useful: to help out the others at work as much as I could, watch over the sheep in the woods, carry home fir-twigs and chop them up to strew on the cowshed floor, help grandpa at the anvil, sew, knit—in brief to lend a hand at just about anything; and then, in the evening, I would borrow grandpa's knife to carve a two-legged horse in bark, for the bark wasn't strong enough to allow of four distinct legs; next in wood with four straight legs; next with trotting legs. Sometimes I could borrow his carpenter's pencil to draw horses or figures on the back of a letter from my mother, which was all the paper we ever had . . . . And how well I remember how with some grease and soot I colored a little man's coat black, and got his face pink with thin blueberry juice, and a green spot with crushed buttercups.

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The time flew by, for Anders loved his grandparents; soon he turned eleven, and it was time to put him to a trade. Was there a place for a stonecutter's apprentice in one of the parishes around Mora? That was a possibility. But one day a letter arrived from some unknown person announcing that Anders's father, upon a chance sight of one of his drawings of a horse and wagon, had decided to pay for his education. It seems that his mother, the bottle-washer Grudd Anna Andersdotter ("Grudd" is the "farm name," "Andersdotter" the patronymic), had kept in touch with her former lover, who with the years had turned into a personage august enough to maintain a conscience. He was a wealthy brewer by the name of Johann Leonhard Zorn who had immigrated to Sweden from Bavaria. Though he never actually turned up, some of his money did, and before long Anna had unstitched her Sunday skirt and refashioned it into a jacket and breeches for Anders. He was sent to the province of Stockholm for the summer "to learn Swedish," that is, national Swedish, since till then he had spoken only the Mora dialect, which was scarcely intelligible to Stockholmers. This he easily acquired, having—as later life would reveal—a gift for languages. Next he boarded with a certain Mrs. Amalia Blomstedt in the town of Enköping about two hours outside the capital. Mrs. Blomstedt grew fond of him, and he seems to have been tolerably content. "I do not doubt," wrote this lady to Anna concerning her young lodger, "that Anna wonders about her little bloke both how he is and how he fares . . . . We all like him very much . . . . He gets splendid marks at school and naturally is very popular . . . . Anna may well conceive that his clothes and especially his shoes have taken a beating, but I think he is happy . . . . He goes to draw at a Mamselle's here in town and does well there too."

Before the year was out word came that Anders's father had died; Anders eventually inherited three thousand crowns. With this sum (and a purse put up some years later by a group of his father's German brewer friends) he was able to procure an artist's education. As soon as he could, he painted portraits for money, starting with corpses lying in state and moving on to live sitters. One of these early sitters proved of particular interest. "It so happened," as he wrote in his memoirs, "that among my other portrait commissions was a very whiny tot, and as his mother couldn't calm him Aunt Emma was called in the following day. This aunt was no ugly old maid but a young and beautiful one with big dreamy blue eyes. Into those eyes I looked more than into those of my model, just as surely as she looked into mine . . . . But there was nothing more superfluous and dubious than a young artist, as I had frequent occasion to hear, and we had to conceal our feelings from each other. Yet I was commissioned by her mother to paint her picture and was frequently invited to her house." The girl with the dreamy blue eyes was Emma Lamm; a photograph taken about a year after their meeting shows a wasp-waisted, doll-like creature with a sensitively modeled mouth and sleepy, heavy-lidded eyes, clad in a rather severe bustled dress. As Anders soon discovered, Emma was a well-educated, strong-willed young woman and an impassioned student of the European art styles.

There is a saying that one should not get married until one is amazed with one's luck: Anders was amazed enough to wait out the four years of a secret betrothal. During those years he wandered restlessly about Europe trying to prove that he would make a reliable husband. As a painter, especially as a watercolorist, he moved from strength to strength, until finally, convinced of his ability, he spent his last few pounds on a good suit, a studio in Upper Brook Street in Mayfair, and a pile of calling cards. His luck held. Presently the Earl of Jersey summoned him to Middleton Park to paint his youngest daughter, Lady Villiers; and there he also mastered British table manners, "how to place the knife and fork when you're done, etc." On his return to London he met the American geologist Clarence King (a friend of Henry Adams's and John Hay's), whom

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he depicted in a velvet suit; this portrait, now in the Smithsonian Institution, marks the beginning of his lifelong fondness for the Americans. In the meantime, he corresponded with Emma and even spent a holiday with her in Paris, where she roused his latent interest in the history of art. Soon he was re-inspected by her family: her cousin Carl Robert Lamm wrote that Anders was "a hybrid of a gentleman and a peasant, and not perhaps the easiest person to have to do with when he was in his moods," though her elder brother Herman abandoned his reservations after three days of carousing with Anders in Paris. Yet Herman's admission in a letter home that "the chap is so damnably difficult of interpretation, quite like the Talmud" suggests that Anders was still afflicted by a certain shyness with his future in-laws.

At last the wedding took place, and what an unlikely union it was: the delicate daughter of a wealthy Jewish textile merchant accepting as her lord and master the round-skulled illegitimate son of a beer-bottle-washer. But it was, after all, a love match: "My true place in the world," he told her, "is a mossy stone surrounded by sighing firs, with a little Jewess on my knee." The honeymoon was to be a grand tour of the Continent, which indeed went well enough until February of 1886, when Anders fell ill of typhoid fever in Istanbul. "This has been the hardest time of my life," wrote Emma to her mother. "We have been married for four months, but during the last weeks I have scarcely dared hope that our marriage would survive that long. My darling has been very near death." That fever was to remain forever etched in Anders's memory: he had hallucinations of a dead woman with a dead child, of Turks attacking him with a jade-handled dagger, of a visit to the Sultan's harem, of an emerald as big as an egg, and finally of the whole sickroom rolling slowly, slowly down through a secret tunnel into the Bosphorus. One may perhaps have leave at this point to imagine the face of a providential European gentleman dimly materializing somewhere near the sufferer's bed—the bowler, the mustache, the unctuous lips pronouncing fabulous sums. Genie-like, this figure really did appear; but he was only the agent of Providence, Providence itself being a man in London by the name of Mr. Ernest Cassel, who begged to place his influence and his fortune at the disposal of Anders Zorn.

As it turned out, Mr. (later Sir) Ernest Cassel's services were not required on this occasion: Anders soon recovered. But those services were to be diligently enlisted in the years to come. Anders had met Cassel very briefly at the Paris home of one of Emma's relatives, Consul Henrik Davidson, who, like Cassel, had invested heavily in the expanding mining industry in southern Dalarna. When Anders turned up in London to thank the German-Jewish financier for his kind offer, he was at once commissioned to paint his portrait, then that of his daughter Maude (later Mrs. Ashley and the mother-in-law of Lord Mountbatten), then that of the Dutch Mrs. Warburg, who had married into the well-known Jewish Warburgs. The English themselves, it appears, were not much interested in Anders, nor he in them. But he went on to paint Cassel's sister Minna and his niece Anna, and rode to the hounds with Cassel at his estates of Dalby and Compton Verney, even watching as the great industrialist, who had a very poor seat, fell from his horse along with several other plutocrats. For Ernest Joseph Cassel, when not financing the construction of the Underground, or building railways in Sweden, or floating huge loans to Porfirio Díaz and the Emperor of China, turned into a sportsman who hunted elk and climbed alps. On the occasion of the Queen's Jubilee he threw a party in Mayfair at Brook House, whose balconies overlooked the procession; and there the bottle-washer's son was able to admire the suave Van Dycks and the eight hundred tons of decorations in Carrara marble. Later, when King Edward knighted Cassel, he gave a court banquet at which Anders sat to table with duchesses and dukes. But above all, it was Cassel who launched Anders's portfolio in London. The

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love match of Emma and Anders had also proved an alliance of Fortune and Talent.

Such are the vagaries of fashion, however, that after the triumph of modernism Anders Zorn, a prince of art among the captains of industry, was gradually forgotten in Britain and America. He died in 1920. Few of his paintings are in public collections in this country, and those that are are not perhaps greatly to our taste. Yet in the last year he has made a spectral reappearance. His *Autobiographical Notes,* whose publication was forbidden by his will until fifty years after his death (and from which I've been quoting) have finally been printed in Stockholm together with a commentary by Professor Hans Henrik Brummer, Curator of the Zorn Collections at Mora in Dalarna.[1] And several of his most interesting pictures, after a long repose in various Swedish museums, have been brought to the United States as part of the "Northern Light" exhibition organized in conjunction with the general cultural celebration called "Scandinavia Today."

Anders Zorn's paintings may be considered as belonging to three overlapping groups. The first and least interesting consists of the commissioned portraits. Though portraiture was Zorn's bread and butter, and he kept to a high standard of day labor, few of these pictures engage the viewer as pieces of color harmony or composition. They belong to the tradition of well-made likenesses of famous people rather than to the history of visual expression, and it is a pity that none of them hang in the Edwardian rooms of the National Portrait Gallery in London. But Zorn was more than a fashionable getter of resemblances. Unlike Sargent, whose manner he partially adopted, he was not at sixes and sevens as soon as the latest sitter had risen and walked out the door. Both men had a certain distaste for the portrait-painter's career, which both pursued for money, but whereas Sargent never found a serious theme to energize his considerable abilities, Zorn had several such subjects at hand. Once, when Cassel's daughter Maude offered to procure him some titled female sitters, he declined with the observation that their fee was surely too high. It is an example of his use of an excessive, ironic courtesy to warn anyone who seemed about to patronize him; but the witticism also held a measure of serious truth. For Anders Zorn's real aesthetic affection was not for well-dressed ladies in drawing rooms but for undressed women—paid models—in peasant cottages or outdoors in the sun. This theme of the naked *femme du peuple* was partly a strategy, like Degas's tubbers, for getting "the female nude" into a realistic setting; but it was also a sublimation of Zorn's strong sexual attraction to the sort of robust working women among whom he had grown up, and who used to bathe naked in their hundreds outside the Swedish fishing and mill towns.

The third group of paintings comprises the genre pictures. After 1895 the Zorns spent much of their time in his hometown of Mora, where they lived in the provincial Dalarna style like a glorified farming couple, though they did not farm. Zorn remained aboriginally loyal to his people, lodging his mother and her new family (she had married and had two more children), and agitating for the preservation of Dalarna's old costumes and observances. By now enormously rich, he founded and endowed a school in Mora, and even taught drawing to the local children. His paintings of Dalarna folk may be seen as a sort of national realism in which the province, by synecdoche, stands for the Nordic region as a whole. In these pictures the Scandinavian free householder is warmly

1 Anders Zorn, *Självbiografiska anteckningar*; Bonnier, Stockholm, 1982. Professor Brummer's commentary is the best thing I have read about Zorn, though I should add that he has another, earlier book on the artist which I haven't been able to obtain. Zorn is one of Sweden's "national painters," rather as meatballs are the national food, and Professor Brummer brings to his subject a wry cosmopolitanism and critical neutrality absent from previous studies. His long notes are a delight in themselves. Much of the information about Zorn in the present article is taken either from the memoirs or from Professor Brummer's commentary.

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but unsentimentally described in his or her daily occupations and festive pastimes, especially music-making and dancing.

Of these three groups of paintings, we may profitably pass over the commissioned portraits. As for the nudes and the genre pictures, the newly published memoirs allow us, more than anything else, to see "through" them. For "Anders" the husband, son, and friend seldom painted the pictures that his recollections would lead us to envision; and the works of "Zorn" the prince of art scarcely prompt us to imagine the man of the memoirs. "Anders" hid behind "Zorn" as "Zorn" hid behind "Anders," confirming that paintings "run to mere eye" and are explained only at the verge where explanation fails us, and we are left with the sort of "understanding" we retain for a friend who is found out to be a peeping tom.

So it is that the Anders Zorn who writes of women with the same delicacy that Captain Hook must have observed when talking below decks about Wendy painted them with a "mere eye" for values, for neutral tonality. Can there be anything droller in the literature of confession than his offhanded mention of hugging the Swedish coastline in his yacht with "my powerful Zeiss binoculars" trained on the beaches where girls went swimming naked? There is more here, or rather, less, than the snigger of devious intent: he was prey, quite simply, to all the beauty in the world, to the ache and the tremor of it. In those days, before 1914, it seemed that the world would go on as it always had, as if to spite his mortal (and expanding) flesh. The races of mankind were still so unalike, so enthralling, both in customs and in garb: he wanted to be everywhere at once. On his trips abroad he ceaselessly crisscrossed Europe, America, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, following women in the streets, luring them into his hotel to paint them, booking rooms in brothels where he posed the loveliest jades, inspecting regiments of beauties in full review order to select the perfect "type" of this or that nationality. He became the greatest collector and classifier since his countryman Linnaeus, but it was women, not flowers, he was after. At a Chicago house of confidence he drew a well-to-do girl who secretly sold her body while studying (if brothel publicity is to be credited) at the Art Institute. In the White House he painted Cleveland's young bride and almost swooned the while: "God how stately and beautiful, and those arms, that neck, that bust worthy to be kissed by a thousand lips and now scarcely to be revealed to mortals!" On a Stockholm street he caught sight of a girl and directly stopped his carriage; she confessed that she was a prostitute but hoped Mr. Zorn could reform her. This he proceeded to do by undressing her in the interests of Art and posing her on a rocky isle. But she grew bored with his concept of redemption, which consisted of her standing still, and during a break stole into a wild strawberry patch and got dressed. When she returned he was livid, but she merely pointed at his sloop, which had dragged anchor and was rapidly drifting into the offing. It must have been a moment to relish: the canvas and palette flying into the bushes while the blimp-like shape, releasing its braided jacket, yachting cap, and white linen upon the breeze, plunged naked into the sea in pursuit of the errant vessel.

One way Anders Zorn got his models was by advertising in the papers: forty poor lasses would turn up only to be rejected for failing to possess the right physiognomic "type." Of course people saw the ads as well as the pictures, and many thought the painter a prurient swine. But except for a few atypical exercises in eroticism, Zorn's pictures were not especially titillating. In his time they were widely thought to be so, but that was only because they countered the prevailing Lutheran prudishness with a sort of healthy physicality: nowadays they seem about as smutty as a nudist beach. A more serious criticism was that Zorn's dashing brushwork, like that of his colleagues Sargent and Sorolla, was too cleverly sketchy, too dandified, for the purposes of sober description. This, as Professor Brummer persuasively argues, is an error. It is not only

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that sophisticated people who were still a bit nervous of his themes tended to transfer their anxiety to his paint-handling; it is also that many critics failed to see how thoughtfully he worked out his compositions, or how willing he was to go over and over weak passages until the brushstrokes were matted like bullrushes. Anders Zorn, despite all that has been said to the contrary, was a conscientious craftsman who rarely scamped his work unless he was painting some grandee whom he didn't especially like.

Yet there is something troubling, something missing, even in so successful a canvas as the large *Outdoors* (1888) now in the Gothenburg Art Gallery. Here we are offered an oblique view across a mass of rocks that falls steeply into the water; beyond this mass, where the shoreline reappears, an empty skiff floats in the shallows. We stand, it seems, upon some skerry or rocky islet, perhaps in the Stockholm archipelago, to which three girls have rowed in order to go swimming. Behind a darkish clump of reeds in the immediate foreground we spy one girl in a petticoat, naked to the waist and in the act of peeling off a stocking. About five yards behind her, overlooking the water, sit the two other girls, already undressed and warming themselves in the pale sunshine. In this angle of vision one might perhaps discern a voyeuristic element—the painter playing Elder to a trio of Susannahs—but that is only, I think, because one knows that "Anders" was a voyeur: the impression is not strong enough to acquire thematic weight.

If this scene is not to be taken as an insipid hymn to the unembarrassed enjoyment of the body, it must be accepted as a piece of pure painting, in which light and shade and color are unfreighted with moral or symbolic value. It is wholly executed in the flowing or slashing strokes of a flat, loaded brush, much as a printed page is composed of letters from a specific font, all analogous to one another in size and shape. The composition is natural and fluent, the figures impeccably drawn in characteristic poses. There is no tiresome striving for an up-to-date grand manner. But the chief virtue of this picture—a virtue almost never absent from Zorn's work—is the instinct for tone, an exceptional sureness in the notation of lights and darks. Everything, from the rocks to the flesh to the rowboat balancing upon its reflection, is rendered in just the right value, with a broad massing of similar values, especially in the murkier shadows. Everything has been studied with a view to generalization, and the effect is strong; the girls' complexions are economically stated, and the rocks are chiselled with admirable restraint. What then is missing? The question is not merely academic: a certain resurgence of this sort of painting has occurred since about 1960, giving Zorn's work admonitory value.

The first thing one may question is the oblique view, the way one peers over the "repoussoir" of reeds which blocks the lower left corner of the canvas. Of course, this device is as old as the hills, or as old as their description in paint, and no landscapist can be perpetually original. But the truth is that it assorts ill with the "abstract" divagations of the brush, with the attention accorded the surface. Because the brushstrokes stand out so discretely from one another and so equally cover the canvas, one is disquieted to enter the picture exclusively from the left side. It is interesting that Manet, who virtually invented this way of working, took care to preserve in his designs a sort of classic frontality whereby the objects recede in parallel fashion from the picture plane. *Outdoors* is somewhat reminiscent of a page of text more heavily inked at one corner than the others.

Even more disquieting than the painting's oblique spatial recession, however, is its color. Anders Zorn was one of those painters, not uncommon at the turn of the century, who favored a so-called "limited" palette. His particular variant comprised black, white, a couple of earth yellows, and vermilion; strong local accents could be added with other pigments. Such a strategy can work only because ivory black is really a deep dull blue that makes mauve when

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mixed with vermilion and olive green when mixed with ochre, so that the whole spectrum can actually be represented, albeit within a restricted register.

Now there is nothing wrong in this way of working, in ringing the changes on a few harmonies at a relatively low level of color saturation while occasionally adding a brighter note to make the picture "sing." One weaves one's four colors together, everything stays in its place, nothing falls out of "keeping." But it is not a bold or frank way of working; it never allows one to discover a rare or bewitching color; and above all it betrays a certain lack of trust in the potentiality of pigments to match or capture the multiplicity of tones in nature. Nature is forever being reduced and managed instead of discovered anew. This lack of frankness and trust was Zorn's Achilles heel as a painter: the monotony of his color cruelly sapped the robustness and sensuality of his themes. His autobiography shows us how crude he could be, especially in his view of women, but that crudeness does not explain how his paintings of women can leave us so oddly dispirited. He was often accused of "extolling Capital and Lust," but his nudes, though not unsexed, were not unchaste. It is curious that anyone so widely regarded as a faithless materialist should really have lacked faith only in a sort of matter, namely the color-merchant's wares. Nothing in his memoirs prepares us for that.

I have mentioned that Zorn also painted scenes of Dalarna peasant life. Two of these pictures have recently toured the United States as part of the "Northern Light" exhibition[2] organized by Professor Kirk Varnedoe of New York University. This show, which included ninety-four paintings by thirty-six Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Danish, and Icelandic artists active between 1880 and 1910, not only helps to put Zorn in context, it also shows us how rich that context was.

"Impressionism," wrote W. B. Yeats in 1925 on the occasion of his trip to Sweden to receive the Nobel Prize,

> arrived in these Scandinavian countries just at the moment when an intellectual awaking of the whole people was beginning, for I always read, or am told, that whatever I inquire about began with the 'eighties, or was the outcome of some movement of that time. When I try to define what separates Swedish Impressionism from French, I notice that it has a stronger feeling for particular places . . . . I notice in the booksellers' shops that there seems to be some little paper-covered pamphlet, full of illustrations, for every notable painter of the school, dead or living, and the people I meet ask constantly what I think of this painter or that other, or somebody will say, "This is the golden age of painting."

This Scandinavian "school," though unfamiliar to most Americans, comprised a large number of exceptionally talented people, some of whom were easily the equals of our own masters of the period. Thus Professor Varnedoe, who selected the works for this exhibition, had a vast reserve of fine pictures to choose from. Yet it must be said that his selection is very odd indeed.

As it happens, a broad and intelligent consensus exists in Scandinavia concerning which were the best and most influential painters of this period. A minimal list would include: from Sweden, Ernst Josephson, Carl Fredrik Hill, Anders Zorn, Carl Larsson, Bruno Liljefors, and Carl Wilhelmson; from Finland, Albert Edelfelt, Akseli Gallén-Kallela, and Louis Sparre (all ethnic Swedes, actually, but also patriotic Finnish citizens); from Norway, Christian Krogh, Edvard Munch, Eilif Petersson, and Ludvig Karsten; from Denmark, Peder Severin Krøyer, Jens Ferdinand Willumsen, and Vilhelm

2 "Northern Light—Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting, 1880-1910" was shown at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., Sept. 8 to Oct. 17, 1982; the Brooklyn Museum in New York, Nov. 10, 1982 to Jan. 6, 1983; and the Institute of Arts in Minneapolis, Feb. 4 to April 10, 1983. In Scandinavia it was shown only at the Gothenburg Art Gallery, May 7 to July 3, 1983.

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Hammershøi; and from Iceland I frankly don't know who. It seems very peculiar that Americans getting their first taste of the Nordic art of this period should be denied a look at any of the paintings of Ernst Josephson, C.F. Hill, Carl Larsson, or J.F. Willumsen.[3] Other brilliant artists, such as Carl Wilhelmson and Albert Edelfelt, are sadly under-represented; there is no point in my explaining why, as their masterpieces have remained in Scandinavia.

Yet such criticism is perhaps beside the point. Professor Varnedoe has insisted upon another, more personal criterion for selecting the pictures: the way that these painters transmuted the special quality of "northern light." In itself this is an intriguing proposition, but having chosen his theme Professor Varnedoe proceeds to abuse it. Neither his nor any of the other six catalogue essays[4] bothers with the subject at all; and the idea of a systematic organization based on northern light, in which distinctions of geography, season, and time of day would play their proper part, apparently occurred to no one. Summer light differs from winter light. Scandinavia is a very big place; the island of Bornholm, with a sky reminiscent of Jersey's, has a different sort of light at any moment than Karelia or the Lofoten archipelago. That many of these pictures exhibit a crepuscular sort of lighting tells us less than one might think. For a certain cultural confusion is at work here: what to an American seems a fondness for poignantly dusky light may merely represent an attempt by Scandinavian realists to render the light that was normally "available"; and this same light may evoke one mood in imaginations native to our temperate zone and another to those at home in the North. Thus when Professor Varnedoe speaks of Midsummer Night as a "magic and achingly ephemeral night of sensuality," one wonders if he understands that what saddens these people is their sense of the fleetingness of summer as a whole, not the shortness of any particular night. It is the brevity and paleness of the summer nights that they adore: how, for example, at midnight, the deep blue of the Dalarna sky is still reflected in the wildflower called *midsommarblomster*; or how the blooming wintergreen and bitter vetch still glimmer faintly in the woods, and the dog-rose blossoms glow on every hedge that rambles up the hills.

At all events we are at the mercy of Professor Varnedoe's taste in Scandinavian painting, which runs unchecked to the melancholic. Now this strain of mourning does exist in the North: any pastor might remind us that it is an important part of human spirituality, which is rooted in the awareness of death. But there is a point, as we know, at which the melancholic turns into the morbid or even the macabre; and since the darkness of the North is often depressing, Nordic culture has always sought a countervailing force. Thoreau once wrote that "a healthy man . . . is the complement of the seasons," and one might add that a healthy culture is

3 A separate Carl Larsson show was in fact on view at the Brooklyn Museum from January 3 to February 20, but it did not travel to Washington, Minneapolis, or Gothenburg.

4 The American catalogue, (240 pp.) contains, in addition to seven essays, reproductions of every painting, each accompanied by a commentary by one of a staff of scholars. The keynote is struck by Professor Varnedoe's essay: "in painting, . . . innovations, rather than taking their point of departure only from the immediately advanced position or from sheer *ex nihilo* invention, may instead draw important substance from minor, dormant, or peripheral areas. This basic fact about the nature of change is worth remembering while considering the relationship of Scandinavian Realism and Symbolism to each other and to the larger pattern of European art history, for it is precisely in its untoward fusions, inversions, and overlaps—indeed, in its backward failure to conform—that Scandinavian painting of the late nineteenth century has the most to offer a new, more flexible model of the nature of progress in early modern art." Whatever one's feelings about this sort of maundering, Professor Varnedoe's essay, like all but two of the others, is far too abstract and recondite for a public that knows nothing of any of the great Nordic artists of the period except Edvard Munch.

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the complement, not only the reflection, of its clime. As the Arabs love fountains and the Latins shutters and broad cornices, so the Scandinavians favor gaily decorated rooms full of flowers and flower motifs. This instinct for equipoise is called, in Swedish, *gemytlighet,* a concept for which we have no word but which is close to the familiar German *Gemütlichkeit* ("coziness, good cheer"). In favoring more than a few morbid paintings, while neglecting the works of such brilliant exponents of *gemytlighet* as Peder Severin Krøyer or Carl Larsson, Professor Varnedoe has willfully created an unbalanced picture of this era in Nordic painting. It is, I think, a picturesque view, in the way that Mrs. Radcliff's novels were picturesque; and in this sense it is also a conventional view, as several Scandinavian critics (who saw the show in Gothenburg, as I did) have pointed out.

We may be grateful, however, that Professor Varnedoe selected two solid examples of Zorn's Dalarna pictures (as well as an unusual self-portrait) for his exhibition. Though both depict the muted summer evening light, neither is gloomy or depressing: Zorn could not be compelled to what Thoreau would have called "a vulgar sadness," his vulgarity lying elsewhere. He was in fact an advocate of all that was bright and merry in the dress and folk-design of his province, whose costumes are the only ones in Sweden, I believe, to show strong complementary colors. The lonely-looking woman in the smaller of these pictures, *Midnight* (1891) is not, however, in Mora dress, but in an everyday striped frock. With its powerful design, finely observed values, and graceful drawing of the woman's double gesture—she is both rowing and turning to look ahead—this canvas represents Zorn at his best. It is, in fact, virtually perfect; one's only reservation is that it is pure Manet, or rather Manet transposed to the sort of cold Nordic summer light that Zorn "always remembered with longing." It is also a testimony to his deep admiration for the Swedish working matron; no one could paint a strong female forearm as he could. Actually he made a fetish of such arms: some look so healthy, so drumstick-like, that they positively incite to cannibalism.

Of the larger painting, *Midsummer Dance* (1897), Zorn said that it "contained all of my innermost feelings." One June day, in the company of his colleague Prince Eugen, the youngest son of King Oscar and himself a noted painter, Anders rowed up the Hemul River and on the way back walked up to Morkarlby. There he sent for a fiddler, who sat himself down on a farmhouse step to play. Soon the yard was full of whirling polka-dancers, and the prince, enchanted at the sight of his people at their comeliest, turned to Anders and said, "You've got to paint this." Anders wasn't particularly interested, but the entreaties continued far into the night and at breakfast the following day. Finally he relented, and the painting came into being. *Midsummer Dance* is a popular classic in Sweden, which one can understand, for the spin of the dancers on the turf, the attitudes of the old men in the timbered farmhouse doorway, and the light of the rising sun caught in the lunette of a distant cottage are all elegantly captured. Yet still the picture is disappointing, an indication of the painter's imminent decline. Once again the viewer enters the composition from the corner; there is no invention in the color harmony; and the sensation of movement is achieved largely by a monotonous blurring of edges all too reminiscent of a photographic "time-exposure." It is a picture to flatter a prince's hopes, in which the festive occasion permits the viewer to overlook the half-hidden anxieties of the "folk." The little girl unconsciously clutching the porringer in another of Professor Varnedoe's selections, *First Snow* (1894) by Count Louis Sparre, says infinitely more about the peasants than does *Midsummer Dance.*

Anders Zorn, as we have seen, was a "difficult" man. No one knew this better than his wife Emma. "Ever since I first laid eyes on her," he wrote, "she has been the one nearest my heart. For when one builds a marriage on warm sympathy and respect, feelings that

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have nothing to do with sex, one easily sails through the squalls." Somehow Emma didn't quite agree, and she was known to stir a squall herself upon occasion. Anders's "authorized" biographer, the satanic-looking draughtsman and wag Albert Engström, put it this way in a letter to his wife Sigrid: "As far as my biography [of Zorn] goes . . . it is merely the *bust* of a great man. If I wrote about the whole figure, including what's under the belt, I could fill volumes. But they wouldn't have much to do with art."

Anders's feelings about his wife, like his feelings about the class and civilization she represented, were complex, perhaps "impure." But his sentiments about his mother, whom he called "Mona" (which is Mora dialect for "mamma") were as simple as could be. There is no better painting by his hand than the watercolor portrait of his mother and his little half-sister, *Mona and Karin* (1885), now in the Gothenburg Gallery. About this picture nothing can be said, because the subject is everything, the manner nothing. "But so it is," as he himself wrote, "that what is done with love inspires love in the beholder."

One of Anders's friends was the distinguished *animalier* Bruno Liljefors, who liked to depict woodcocks mating and hawks attacking grouse. Anders painted Bruno looking rather grumpy amid some snowy pines; one wonders how Bruno would have painted Anders. Anders was a sleek, aquatic sort of creature, rarely showing his teeth, with sensitive-looking whiskers and serrate locks of hair: surely Bruno would have done him as an otter. Drawn in the manuscript of the *Autobiographical Notes* are some scratchy self-portraits that bear an arresting stylistic resemblance to E. H. Shepard's first hesitant sketches for Mole and Rat. And when you come to think of it, wouldn't Anders have been happy beside them, sunning himself upon the rocks, slipping in and out of the river, enjoying every sort of water privilege—and never straying too far from the purlieus of Toad Hall?

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Windy City letters

by Joseph Epstein

Asked to write about literary life in Chicago, I feel a bit like the legendary author of a survey of Finnish ornithology. This was the man who, when it came time to write his chapter on the owls of Finland, touched the tip of his pen to his tongue and completed his chapter with the following single sentence: "There are no owls in Finland." There is more literary life in Chicago than there are owls in Finland, though it sometimes seems not much more, for the literary life in this city is not generally in greater evidence than those Finnish owls.

To be sure, writers live in Chicago, magazines are published here, and a good deal of writing gets done. But of literary life conceived of as writers living together in some semblance of a community, meeting with one another, talking about one another's work, discussing and arguing and, yes, backbiting about reviews, books, and ideas—of this there is almost none. Saul Bellow, by general consensus America's premier writer, lives in Chicago, and he does so for a variety of reasons, one of which is that Chicago, unlike New York, is free of the literary life.

Writers in New York may not think they are leading much in the way of a literary life either, but allow me to cite a fairly recent literary-political event that took place in Manhattan and that could never have taken place in Chicago. I have in mind that evening in Town Hall on which Susan Sontag, in connection with a rally for the Polish members of Solidarity, arose to announce—not very originally and extraordinarily belatedly—that Communism was only Fascism with another face. This rather commonplace pronunciamento, it will be recalled, caused a great stir. Miss Sontag's speech was reprinted, she was the subject of attack, her speech was covered in the press, rejoinders to her speech were printed in other journals, there was a general hubbub of a kind that could have occurred, for better or worse, only in a city that had something approximating a literary community.

Not that Miss Sontag's speech and the reaction to it was especially elevating, but when it took place I could not help thinking how a similar event simply could never have happened in Chicago. Let us say, to construct an imaginary analogue, that Saul Bellow in Chicago wished to announce that nuclear armaments must continue to be stockpiled—or, for that matter, scrapped; the political message is of no moment. Where would he do so? Who would show up to listen to him? The Chicago press, it is almost certain, would give him little coverage. One can imagine the boredom that the prospect of such a speech would occasion in the city rooms of the Chicago dailies. "What's his name, the novelist, the Nobel guy, he's going to say something about nuclear weapons tonight at the Cultural Center. I suppose we ought to send somebody." No, it is all quite unthinkable.

People don't ask if Houston has a literary life, or if Los Angeles does, or if Cleveland

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or San Francisco or Washington, D.C., does. They don't because they know the answer—that none of these cities has much of a literary life beyond a few writers living in town, a couple of decent bookstores, the men and women teaching in the creative writing program at the university. But people do ask about Chicago's literary life, and they do so because Chicago did once have such a life, a fairly thriving one from several accounts, and one wonders whether it is still here, or, if it is not, where it went. On the glory days, allow me to bring in a friendly witness, Van Wyck Brooks, from whose chapter "Chicago: 1910" in *The Confident Years, 1895-1915* I now quote:

> With every year the Middle West assumed a larger and larger role in the literary life of the country. Novelists, poets and story-tellers, emerging there on every hand, had been followed by leaders in criticism and leaders in thought like Veblen, Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, and Chicago seemed on the point of becoming what H. L. Mencken was to call it soon, the literary capital of the United States. There Dreiser had begun to write, with George Ade and "Mr. Dooley," there Robert Herrick flourished, with Garland and Fuller, and Ring Lardner and Sherwood Anderson were already at work in the city that Hemingway and John Dos Passos knew as boys. Vachel Lindsay, Masters and Sandburg, the poets, were appearing. Observing Chicago a few years later, Mencken said that for a score of years almost every literary movement of importance in the country had originated under the shadow of the stockyards. Nine times out of ten the writers with "something peculiarly American to say" had some connection with Chicago, Mencken remarked, for either they had been born there or they had got their start there or passed through there in the days when they were young and tender.

Floyd Dell, in *Homecoming,* his autobiography, gives a very good eyewitness account of those days in Chicago. Young men and women came to Chicago in the first decades of the century from the country and small towns of the Midwest; Dell himself was from Davenport, Iowa. Many of them, including Dell, found jobs on newspapers. If they didn't work on literary pages, they reviewed books. A popular meeting place for writers was A. C. McClurg's Bookstore, where they would meet to sell their review copies. These young men and women, by no means all of them university educated, constituted, in Floyd Dell's view, "a growing youthful body of American literary taste, which had nourished itself upon the very best European literature and had civilized modern standards." They acquired their education in public, writing about books and learning as they went. Dell had a job as assistant editor of *The Friday Literary Review,* which appeared as a supplement to the *Evening Post,* a paper whose specialty was reporting financial news but which nonetheless had a reputation for literary brilliance. Dell offers a partial list of the authors whose books he reviewed during his first two years on *The Friday Literary Review*:

> . . . Jack London, David Graham Phillips, Hilaire Belloc, James George Frazer, Hewlett's poems, Frank Norris's 'prentice work, O. Henry, Alice Meynell, William Blake, Gelett Burgess, the Journals of Emerson, James Oppenheim's poems, Gertrude Atherton, Helen R. Martin, Eden Philpotts, Francis Thompson, George Meek "the Bath-Chair Man," Granville Barker (whom I disliked heartily as a Puritan), Nietzsche, Emily James Putnam (from whom I learned a great deal about the history of women), Ezra Pound, Anna Hempstead Branch, George Brandes, Arnold Bennett, Maurice Baring, Gustav Frenssen, Ford Madox Hueffer, Upton Sinclair (whom I scolded for his wrong views on genius and sex), Bernard Shaw (whom after a long period of idolization I violently repudiated as a prophet, because of his Puritanism—the most dogmatic and silly piece of "criticism" I ever wrote in my life), Arthur Schnitzler, Frank Swinnerton, Ellen Glasgow, G. K. Chesterton, George Moore . . . .

An exciting time it was to be alive, and to

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be in Chicago was pretty good, too. Dell and the young Chicago writers lived bohemianly. "Talk was almost the chief instrument of our lives," he reports, "and it lasted longer and longer into the night." Something new of a literary or artistic kind was always bursting onto the scene. Harriet Monroe began *Poetry Magazine* in 1912. That same year plans were made to bring the Post-Impressionist show to Chicago. Sandburg and Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson and Edgar Lee Masters and Vachel Lindsay were on the scene. Margaret Anderson, who would later found the *Little Review* and publish James Joyce, turned up as a perhaps too exuberant reviewer of novels. Everyone was a poet, and those who weren't intended to write novels. In Dell's circle, "all of us were going to write novels. It was to us a way of escape from the essentially humiliating situation of being, as newspapermen, the hired hands of ignorant, mean and base employers." In 1913 Floyd Dell moved to New York, but he ends the portion of *Homecoming* having to do with his Chicago days on this paean:

> I had been happy in Chicago; never would it seem to me a grey and ugly city. I loved the Lake, Michigan Boulevard with its open vista and its gleaming lights, the Parks, even the preposterous loop district with its sudden architectural leap into the sky; I had seen beauty there, enough to fill my heart; there had been days and nights of talk and laughter; the years had passed in a golden glow of friendship; and it was a city haunted everywhere by the memories of love, its pain and its glory. It had been a generous city to a young man. I would always be grateful for what it had given me.

A. J. Liebling, who wrote about Chicago as an outsider, and whose book *Chicago: The Second City* has not made his a name to give a cheerful lift to Chicago parties and cultural events, first came to the city in 1938, and, having read a certain amount about the "literary revolution" that had gone on there years before, found it a sore disappointment. In *Chicago: The Second City,* which after running in *The New Yorker* was published as a book in 1952, Liebling noted: "For a city where, I am credibly informed, you couldn't throw an egg in 1925 without braining a great poet, Chicago is hard up for writers." Whenever Liebling and his wife would go out socially in Chicago, Nelson Algren, then flush with the success of *The Man with the Golden Arm,* would also be invited. "A man named Milton Mayer, who writes articles for magazines, was another standard act," Liebling wrote apropos of Chicago literary life, which, it seems fair to say, did not exactly thrill him. "The rest of the party was usually made up of admiring patrons of the arts and members of the faculty of the University of Chicago."

This is still a fairly accurate description of a cultural night out in Chicago. Nelson Algren is now dead, and I don't know what happened to Milton Mayer. In exchange for them you might nowadays find Mortimer J. Adler or the columnist Sydney Harris. But those patrons will still be there and so, too, the faculty members from the University of Chicago. One thing sure is that you are not likely to hear someone say, "Remember what Bunny [Wilson] said to Cal [Lowell] about Red [Warren]." But then hearing lines like that may not be your idea of a swell night on the town anyway.

Perhaps the single most devastating thing ever written about the literary life in Chicago is a parody by W. B. Scott entitled "Chicago Letter" that originally appeared in 1949 in *Furioso.* A send-up of those pretentious letters that appeared in little magazines, perfect in tone and feel, Scott's "Chicago Letter" makes the point that there isn't enough literary life in Chicago around which to compose such a letter. "Chicago Letter" begins with its author discovering, by glancing through a copy of the latest issue of *Peristalsis,* that everyone he had hoped to see in Chicago is out of town writing similar letters: "Mildred's Belgrade Letter, Sam's Naples Letter, Boris's Pskov Letter, Fred's Capetown Letter, Deirdre's Quito Letter, Jaroslav's Paris Letter, and

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Harry's Prague Letter." Nonetheless, after a sufficiently portentous opening ("Agony, a sense of plight; a sense of agony, plight—such, one soon perceives, are the attributes of the Chicago of our time"), our man perseveres in reporting the cultural news from Chicago thus:

> Other facts suggest the city's agony. A fortnight after my arrival I read in the *Cicero Quarterly* (which last week ceased publication) of the dissolution of the Goose Island Sartre Club, whose president, with ironic ambivalence, rather than commit suicide had taken a job as a check-out boy in a supermarket. Early today, as I started to compose this letter, Jeremy Irk phoned to tell me that the Rogers Park *Cercle Rimbaud* is down to nine members, eight of whom do not speak to each other. Yet, with all this endemic apathy, one learns of eruptions of violence as well (I do not allude here to the Bosnian riots, of course). In the dim alleys of the South Side, I am told, "goon squads" from the Aristotle A.C. sally out after nightfall to sack hostile bookshops or worse. Such things are, to be sure, a kind of action, although I cannot say what hope one is to take from it.

Liebling reporting from outside, and W. B. Scott (a longtime resident) gently mocking from within, are both essentially on target on the subject of literary life in Chicago, at least insofar as that life is construed to be about coherent and serious literary-social activities. Yet, at the same time, if it is true that Chicago has had almost no literary life worthy of the name, it has also continued to produce impressive literature. Chicago was James T. Farrell's city: it continues to be Saul Bellow's. It was the first northern city that Richard Wright lived in, and it provided him with the setting for *Native Son*. Nelson Algren, of course, grew up here and remained here most of his life, though his name, it must be said, usually lent Chicago a fairly bogus reputation as a tough writers' town. Albert Halper and Meyer Levin were born in Chicago. Isaac Rosenfeld, whom one tends to regard as sweet rather than tough, is another Chicago writer, one who, at thirty-seven, died much too young. There is something about the city of Chicago that produces literary talent without the aid of any literary life.

In providing so little in the way of literary life, Chicago can perhaps not be said to be very good to its writers, but it has been very good for writing. Why so many good writers have been born here, or have spent ample chunks of time here, is a question that has received much theorizing. Some people say that Chicago is the last great American city; not a world city like New York, where the mechanics of publicity grind away so ceaselessly; nor a freeway city of the future like Los Angeles or Houston; nor a pretty city with the atmosphere of a large boutique like San Francisco; but an American city, with neighborhoods and industries and ethnic groups and every kind of competing interest. It is, in this view, a city in which one grows up with a strong hold on reality; it permits no illusions, especially about the importance of art, or at least literary art.

Apart from literary art, Chicago, it needs to be said, makes no lesser obeisance to art and culture than any other city. Its millionaires have been no less generous. To do a quick inventory of the city's cultural assets, there is the Chicago Symphony, which, insofar as one can trust such ratings, is currently rated among the best symphony orchestras in the world; there is the Art Institute, with its great holdings in French Impressionists; there is the Lyric Opera; there are, in the University of Chicago and Northwestern University, two considerable centers of learning, and, in Loyola, De Paul, and the University of Illinois in Chicago, three quite respectable ones; there are museums of contemporary art and string quartets and wind ensembles and chamber music orchestras and much public sculpture, and the usual panoply of auxiliary and supporting cultural institutions. But there isn't much for writers —except perhaps one thing: great subjects.

One such subject was pointed out by Saul Bellow at the Chicago Public Library in 1973 in an address entitled "Chicago and

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American Culture, One Writer's View." On that occasion Bellow said:

> With us there has always been a wild discrepancy between the thing of the book and that of the street, between the poem and the poolroom, between the plaster bust of Pericles gathering lovely dust in the assembly hall and the real nose and cheeks of Big Bill under his campaign hat. There were always two sets of facts, two languages, two codes—there was the *beau ideal* and there was the hustle, there were sacred teachings and there were secular deeds. These differences bred scepticism and antagonism. Culture, like religion, insisted on being respected and encountered similar subversiveness and opposition. An enforced respect brought out the worst in everyone. The first, the great and triumphant reality of American society was and is the public one, the industrial, capitalistic, political, democratic, noisy, hustling, real reality.

In New York, talking regularly with fellow writers, lunching with publishers, doing frequent business with magazine editors, one can come to believe that writing is at the center of the world's business. In Chicago this is a distinctly less vivid possibility. Reality keeps obtruding. A case in point. One day during a dull patch of a telecast of a Chicago Cubs game, I heard one of the two Chicago announcers say to the other: "I picked up the *Sun-Times* with breakfast this morning and saw Sparky Anderson's [then manager of the Cincinnati Reds] picture on the front page. I wondered, what's Sparky done to get his picture on the front page? It turns out it wasn't Sparky at all. It was a writer named Saul Bellow who won the Nobel Prize."

Is it for such reasons that writers flee Chicago? If it is recognition, if it is a lively sense of community, if it is a sense of being involved in a common enterprise called literature—if you seek any of these things, then Chicago is not the place for you. And yet one wonders—I wonder—if the literary life isn't an unrealizable ideal, like the perfect party or marriage or children, or something not available here on earth, however nice it is to think about. One thinks of the literary life in connection with Johnson, Goldsmith, Gibbon, and eighteenth-century London; or with the brothers Goncourt, Flaubert, Sainte-Beuve, and their twice-monthly dinners at the Restaurant Magny; or with the young F. Scott Fitzgerald sighting from the seat of his cab Edmund Wilson, who represented for Fitzgerald "the Metropolitan Spirit." All this and more goes into that perhaps fantasy creation known as the literary life.

Of course, there is another view, and it was represented by H. L. Mencken, who lived all his life in Baltimore, commuting to Manhattan during the years he edited *The Smart Set* and *The American Mercury*. Mencken is on record saying that he could do nicely without the company of writers, who mostly preferred to talk about money anyway. He preferred physicians and businessmen for his friends. Perhaps he did so because he found less ego among them; perhaps he found their grasp of reality greater. But then Mencken was *sui generis*.

Many writers flee Chicago for New York and the ideal of the literary life; and many more writers will never leave New York for fear of leaving the literary life. But if the literary life is your ideal, Chicago, to repeat, does not offer a great deal of it. Not that the institutional framework for such a life doesn't exist. While Chicago hasn't anywhere near so many publications as New York, *Playboy* is published here and so is *Poetry,* and in *Chicago* the city has a thick and thriving city magazine that publishes fiction along with the usual ten-best lists—ten best restaurants, ten best private schools, ten best places to acquire a hernia—that Clay Felker made famous at *New York*. The city also has a quite successful giveaway sheet called *The Reader,* which attracts young writers and which pays a decent fee for articles and profiles and music and art criticism that tend to be of a higher kind than appear in the city's dailies. An organization called the Society of Midland Authors has long been in existence, and word has it that a Midwestern

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chapter of P.E.N. is soon to form. The Poetry Center at the School of the Art Institute has now been in business for a decade, and draws as many as two hundred people for some of the poetry readings it sponsors. Most of the universities in town offer creative writing programs, and these have attracted poets and novelists as teachers along with a number of ardent students.

And yet, somehow, it doesn't all come together—it doesn't add up to what one thinks of as a literary life. Part of the problem is geography, and I mean literally distance. "It is, at best, in Chicago," Floyd Dell noted, "a long way from anywhere to anywhere else." There are serious writers at the University of Chicago in Hyde Park and serious writers at Northwestern University in Evanston, but the distance between Hyde Park and Evanston is twenty miles. One doesn't hop about so easily as one does in Manhattan, going, say, from an editorial office to dinner at the Century Club to a book publication party at a publisher's office. Such an afternoon and evening in Chicago, if it could be imagined —and it would have to be imagined, for it certainly doesn't exist—would involve serious logistical problems, not the least of which is to come up with something even remotely like the Century Club and a trade publisher's office.

Chicago is far from bereft of serious writers, though the names, apart from Saul Bellow's, are not glittering, bang-the-gong bestseller ones. Still, living within the Chicago metropolitan area, as they say down at the planning board, are a number of novelists, poets, critics, and journalists of national reputation. Yet, with the exception of the journalist Studs Terkel, who has a regular FM radio show, very few of these writers seem to have much to do with the life of the city. Almost all of them, I should add, are university teachers; and as a result their basic social milieu appears to be the academic department.

If there are any literary cliques or coteries in Chicago, I do not know of them. The closest thing to literary society of which I personally have partaken is the occasional cocktail or dinner party thrown by the University of Chicago Press for a visiting literary personage: Lord Anan or Michael Holroyd or R. K. Narayan. A good deal of other sorts of social-literary activity may be going on. But then I am very far from being an insider in Chicago literary life. Serious evidence of how far from an insider I am confronted me some seven or eight years ago when, upon my being introduced to the editor of *The Chicago Tribune Magazine,* he paid me the compliment of telling me that he knew my writing and then went on to say that he always assumed I lived in New York.

To be thought of as living in New York may constitute another compliment, though this is a bit tricky. Many Chicago writers suffer the Second City mentality vis-à-vis New York. This mentality is divided into two sad parts: inferiority and paranoia (minus, of course, the delusions of grandeur). At the same time that many Chicago writers sense their condition to be vaguely inferior to that of writers living in New York, they also feel that things just might be rigged against them. Chicago has no restaurant comparable to Elaine's in New York, where fast-track journalists and show-business celebrities hang out. Perhaps the closest equivalent is the bar at a restaurant called Ricardo's, and there, when talk gets round to such matters, one may on a sour night hear talk about New York literary mafias controlling all traffic in literary reputations. A number of Chicago poets, too, feel that they might be better situated in New York, not for poetry writing but for poetry politics, which, carefully played, might garner them important readings, significant blurbs, possibly a primary instead of a tertiary publisher.

I have called this a Second City mentality because, though I could be wrong, I don't think writers in Boston, as a collectivity, look upon New York with the same squinty suspiciousness that Chicago writers tend to have. Of course, Boston has three serious trade publishers, *The Atlantic Monthly,* and a large roster of universities. Nor does one tend to

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think of writers living in Boston as "Boston writers." One does, alas, tend to think of writers living in Chicago as "Chicago writers," and this is not necessarily a good thing. The label "Chicago writer" suggests a certain heavy-handed realism, a slight crudity of subject matter and presentation, that is far from a clear badge of merit. In part this derives from the reputation of Nelson Algren as the Chicago writer par excellence. If there be a single reigning cliché about writing in Chicago, it is that of the Chicago writer, *à la* Nelson Algren, as tough guy. This particular cliché is far from a helpful one, either in explaining what Chicago writers are like or in lending them as a group much appeal.

If a single thread bound together Chicago writers of another day, that thread was probably the response of these writers to the burgeoning industrialism that was Chicago's *mise-en-scène*: the business of Chicago was business. But it does so no longer. Lee Webster, the editor of a little magazine that he calls *Another Chicago Magazine,* is probably correct when he says that nowadays Chicago "has an influence on individual writers. But there is no school, no genre, and the city doesn't necessarily have a unitary influence on its writers anymore." When one thinks of the city's two best-known resident poets, Gwendolyn Brooks and John Frederick Nims, one immediately recognizes that, from the standpoint of technique and subject, they have very little in common. Neither do two locally well-known novelists, Harry Mark Petrakis, who writes about Greeks in Chicago, and Richard Stern, a professor at the University of Chicago who has produced a large number of novels on a variety of subjects in a number of different styles. Leon Forrest and Cyrus Colter, the city's two most prominent black novelists, are about as unlike each other as any two writers can be. Chicago writers today are ethnic, academic, hard- and soft-boiled. I am trying to delay as long as possible coming out with that most boring of sentences, but I can, I see, delay it no longer: Diversity characterizes the current Chicago literary scene.

What also characterizes it for a number of Chicago writers is a sense, slight in some and strong in others, of writing in a void—of writing, that is, without anyone much caring about one's work. Although Chicago provides the third largest market for retail book sales in the United States—after New York and Los Angeles—one doesn't have a sense that Chicago writers are particularly supported by Chicago readers. (But then are New York and Boston writers supported by the readers of their cities? One doesn't, after all, read regionally, and the only useful division of books for readers is into good books and bad books.) The editors of *Chicago* magazine do see that Chicago writers' books get reviewed in its pages, and the book-page editors of *The Chicago Tribune* and *The Chicago Sun-Times* do likewise. Still, my sense is that the majority of writers in Chicago, if pressed, would allow that they feel a little out of it.

It was the feeling of out-of-it-ness and loneliness that, for me, reigned at a recent festival of the literary arts in Chicago that was given the unhappy general title of "Write On, Chicago." Featuring five full days of panels, papers, and readings, "Write On, Chicago" was sponsored by the Chicago Public Library and the Illinois Humanities Council and had received, in the bureaucratic phrase, "additional funding" from such foundations as Atlantic Richfield, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Woods Charitable Fund, and from the National Endowment for the Humanities and Andrew Greeley. It had an advisory committee of forty-two members, the majority of them academics and local journalists. It had Project Co-Directors and the aid of a small group called Professionals in the Humanities. It had a lengthy list of participating organizations, from the Children's Reading Round Table to the Goethe Institute of Chicago to the Museum of Science & Industry. I myself must have received six different mailings announcing the event. In short, "Write On, Chicago" was a cultural event of the new thoroughly organized and adminis-

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tered kind, in which culture was made to feel like the Pepsi Generation, comin' at ya, goin' strong.

With a five-day program, "Write On, Chicago" was certainly comin' at us, but as for goin' strong, that was another question. Interesting-sounding panels were promised on "Publishing in Chicago" and "Chicago and the Little Magazine" (two panels, one on historical perspectives and another on the contemporary scene), and on "The Bookstore as a Literary Center." Karl Shapiro, a former editor of *Poetry,* was coming in from California for a reading; Alfred Kazin had been invited from New York to deliver the keynote address. But into this five-day stew there were also tossed some pretty meager scraps. A paper entitled "Chicago as Symbol in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Norris's *The Pit*" didn't sound exactly like something you would want to take your best girl to before proposing marriage. "Various Images of Chicago in James T. Farrell's Short Stories" surely sounded as if the cultural cake were being cut thin, as did "Algren the Poet" and a paper on Meyer Levin that excluded his best novel, *The Old Bunch,* because that novel was the subject of another paper. "James Purdy's Chicago," which a professor was coming two hundred miles' distance from Indiana University at Indianapolis to deliver, sounded like something I, for one, would be willing to travel two hundred miles' distance in the other direction to avoid hearing. But, then, I may be growing too old to hear out any more sentences that begin, "Essential to the theme and structure of the novel . . . ."

Could anyone have sat through all five days of "Write On, Chicago" who was not either being paid to do so by a foundation or attempting to get into the *Guinness Book of World Records* for most culture sucked up in a concentrated period? Not being in either condition—paid by a foundation or trying for a world record—I did what I suspect most people did who attended "Write On, Chicago"; that is, I attended those sessions that, as well as comporting with my regular schedule, interested me most. These included the opening day's festivities and, two days later, papers on Chicago novelists and a panel on "The Contemporary Scene in Chicago Fiction."

The scene of "Write On, Chicago" was the Chicago Public Library Cultural Center, which was formerly the Chicago Public Library, a fine old building that, a few years back, narrowly missed the wrecker's ball. It has a splendid marble stairway and a number of rooms of civic magnificence, rooms which, though I have long admired them, have never yet provided me with a serious discouragement to somnolence. It was in one such room, Preston Bradley Hall—named after a local minister famous for striking the note of uplift in his sermons—that the opening sessions of "Write On, Chicago" took place.

A. J. Liebling would, I suspect, have recognized the crowd. Apart from the panelists who were to speak this afternoon, there were a number of patrons of the arts and University of Chicago faculty members, along with a number of faculty members from lesser universities. Women preponderated, as they did at cultural events in Chicago when Henry James came here to lecture. (He noted two men in the audience, one of whom quickly rolled off to sleep.) Waitresses in uniforms passed among the hundred and fifty to two hundred or so people with trays of canapés; coffee, tea, and pastry were set out upon a long table. The heat in the room was up too high.

I was reminded that, in some armies, it is probably a mistake to gather all the troops in one place. If George Washington had assembled the revolutionary forces in a single central spot, if the various troops had had the opportunity to look upon each other, noting the many wounded and crippled and ill-provisioned among their own numbers, such would have been the loss in morale that this country might still be British. On the few occasions when I have dropped by for a single session of the Modern Language Association meeting, I have had similar thoughts. I knew the troops were weak, but not this weak. Ah, me, it's enough to make

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one wish one were a physicist. Again, while awaiting the opening of proceedings in Preston Bradley Hall, I rather wished I were a Denver instead of a Chicago writer.

The opening panel was meant to set the tone for "Write On, Chicago." Three academics, a bookseller, and three journalists (one long retired) sat on it. Its moderator was a local PBS television interviewer who began by squeezing the melodeon, as Mencken used to say, for a few choice clichés. "The academic humanists have struck again!" he said apropos of "Write on, Chicago." He hoped that the panel here assembled would demonstrate some of "that good Algren outrage." Two academics began, and each spoke quite well. One recalled the advice of that old Harvard snob, Barrett Wendell, telling a young man who had come to the Midwest to teach that he ought to think of himself as a Tacitus studying the German barbarians. The other remarked that Chicago, in the literary history of the past century, "seemed to set the norm for reality." They were followed by the bookseller, a man named Stuart Brent, who spoke with passion about what he saw as "the growing indifference to reading" and who announced that, with very few exceptions, contemporary publishers "cheapen, vulgarize, and adulterate everything they put out." Next spoke a man named Herman Kogan, a former public relations and newspaper man who has a book-chat show on the city's most successful classical music station. He rambled on, to what point I was unable to discern. Fanny Butcher, a woman of the generation and with something of the appearance of Marianne Moore, spoke from a wheelchair about the good old Chicago days of Charles MacArthur and Ben Hecht, of the idolatry accorded Eugene Field, who used to hold court at McClurg's Bookstore, and about Chicago writers during Prohibition. There were two further speakers before questions were taken from the audience. I left as I heard a woman seated in the front ask the panel members why they had ignored the question of computers. "Write On, Chicago" was off and limping.

Alfred Kazin, the keynote speaker, is not someone I overesteem, so I strain here to be objective. Professor Kazin spoke of his own excitement as a boy in Brooklyn, the son of an immigrant father, upon reading Vachel Lindsay and other of the Chicago writers of that day. He spoke of the "materialism" of Chicago, noting that the city was "the American battleground" for the social question. Speaking rapid-fire, he ran a little verbal slide show, clicking off the reactions of Mark Twain, Henry James, Henry Adams, and other great American literary figures to Chicago. He recalled meeting James T. Farrell in New York. He recalled meeting Saul Bellow and other Chicago writers of his, Kazin's, own generation. The Holocaust, the Cold War, the nuclear terror "has of course betrayed us" (his generation), he opined. He offered some brief animadversions on Saul Bellow's later novels, saying that he preferred *The Victim* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* to all other Bellow novels, adding that he thought Bellow wrote better about New York than about Chicago. He referred to "the liberal idealism that has always been part of America," and referred as well to "this decayed liberal America." Saul Bellow, Edward Shils, the University of Chicago, so many people and institutions hadn't kept the liberal faith, he felt. Professor Kazin didn't say that he himself had, but I think that, from the tone of his address, it can be assumed that he felt he had. When finished, he was handsomely applauded.

When I returned to "Write On, Chicago" two days later it was to a rather sleepy audience scattered about in a small and somewhat dimly lit theater. A man was droning on about Charles T. Yerkes, the figure on whom Dreiser had modeled Frank Cowperwood, the hero of his three Cowperwood novels, *A Trilogy of Desire*. A professor from the University of South Florida next rose to speak about Meyer Levin's novel *Compulsion*. He mentioned Levin's having grown up around Racine Avenue in Chicago, pronouncing Racine in the French way, when in Chicago the "a" is pronounced as in "ray."

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(Bus drivers in Chicago also pronounce Goethe Street as Go-thee; so much for literary fame in this city.) A woman came in loaded down with packages from Marshall Field & Company. It was nearing four in the afternoon, and some people in the audience had been listening to papers since nine that morning.

After a ten-minute break, the next panel came on. It had to do with the contemporary scene in Chicago fiction. The panel included two relatively unknown fiction writers who earned their living teaching; another man who had written a novel and some stories but the bulk of whose income came from writing pieces for *Playboy*; a woman who has worked on little magazines in the city; and the book editor of *The Chicago Tribune*. The moderator was the *Tribune*'s obituary editor, a man who had published some detective stories, and who, though a decent enough sort, leaned rather heavily on the word "interact," as when he asked some of the panelists to name "writers you interact with." The people on this panel cared about writing, and one could see quickly enough that their way hasn't been easy. When the book editor of the *Tribune* was asked why he didn't run more reviews, he answered that management at the paper allowed him exactly as much space for reviews as he was able to obtain book advertisements—a condition that certainly does not exist on, say, the sports pages.

One of the writers on the panel, the novelist James Park Sloan, showed in the way he talked about it a true appetite for teaching creative writing, an activity most writers look upon with loathing. "Great literature," he said he tried to convey to his students, "is about losing but not about losers." All the writers on this panel had themselves been students in creative writing programs. James Park Sloan said that it was his sense of the matter that such community as exists among young Chicago writers exists through writing programs in colleges. The two other writers on the panel, both University of Iowa Writers' Workshop graduates, agreed, one of them saying that his days at Iowa represented "the first and last literary community I have ever been in." I found that sad, but I suspect that it is increasingly true of writers in our day.

Sitting at this conference, it was hard not to think that most people who write can be reasonably assured that their efforts will achieve oblivion. But nowadays in Chicago a great many writers seem to achieve oblivion in their prime. Such pleasures as the literary life affords—recognition, praise, the support of fellow workers—are unlikely to be theirs. Such pleasures as they are to derive from writing will have to be found at the desk, pen in hand, attempting to form sentences, formulate thoughts, capture feelings. The recognition, the praise, the support are all very fine, but the literary life, as all who work earnestly at it come to know, is ultimately lived alone. Passion for writing, to adapt James Park Sloan's remark about great literature, may be a losing proposition, but those who genuinely feel it are not losers, even in Chicago.

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Design

The "big picture" in Philadelphia

by William H. Jordy

It is surprising that the important exhibition "Design Since 1945," organized by Kathryn B. Hiesinger and currently on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, is the first attempt at a global survey of industrial design done since World War II.[1] Such comprehensive assessments have in the past, in this country at least, been associated with New York's Museum of Modern Art; but the brave venture by Philadelphia reminds us that MOMA's leadership in this respect is very much in the past.

The first American museum survey of truly modern industrial design was Philip Johnson's "Machine Art" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1934. To be sure, there had been precedents. The Metropolitan Museum of Art had presented a long string of pioneering annual exhibitions of contemporary industrial design beginning shortly after the First World War. And there were others. But these were exhibitions of custom-designed *objets de luxe,* and mostly traditional in style. When "modern" did show itself in the exhibited objects, especially after the mid-Twenties, it was with the decorative "machine look," now termed Art Deco, which, after 1930, sometimes showed evidence of the more austere streamlining to come. The very cover of Johnson's catalogue, a crown of ball bearings, announced that a new epoch had arrived.

After the "Machine Art" exhibition MOMA continued to collect and exhibit industrial design, but it was not until 1940 that it established a full-fledged department of industrial design. A series of "useful objects" shows between 1938 and 1946 (one in 1938 featured objects priced at under five dollars; the limit was raised to ten dollars in 1940 and 1941) were very much in the spare, economical temper of the time, made more austere by wartime shortages. Until roughly 1955 the museum attempted to chart in a broad way the state of industrial design, and even to encourage its development through a series of competitions. Eliot Noyes's "Organic Design" show of 1941 was especially notable in bringing forth the prototypes for influential chairs by Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen. And Edgar Kaufmann's succession of "Good Design" shows and other MOMA exhibitions continued the tradition. After 1955, however, MOMA's efforts flagged a bit. For reasons of budget and space, its department of industrial design returned to a junior partnership with architecture.

By then, perhaps, it was thought that MOMA's patrons at least were on the right track, that they had been helped to know what "good design," or "right design," really was. Thanks to MOMA's example, "right design" came generally to represent the cutting edge of departments of "decora-

1 "Design Since 1945" opened at the Philadelphia Museum of Art on October 16, 1983 and remains on view through January 8, 1984. It will not be shown elsewhere.

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tive arts" in most American museums. Local curators of decorative arts came to be charged with turning their attention away from Louis Seize long enough to grab whatever vintage Mies or Eames had been discarded from the office or breakfast nook of avant-garde patrons. With time, of course, many museums (the Walker Art Institute in Minneapolis, with its *Design Quarterly,* comes to mind) treated industrial design more than casually. Gradually, "good design" became canonized as museum design.

Not that MOMA did not continue to count massively in later exhibitions of industrial design. In fact, it remained the model for all other museum efforts in the field. But even major events—such as Emilio Ambasz's show of radical new Italian work in "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape" exhibit of 1972—were fragmentary. Various museums offered important exhibitions devoted to the postwar design achievement of individual designers, of a nation, a material (wood, plastic), or a category (chairs, lamps). But none tried to show the "big picture."

None, that is, until Philadelphia. The exhibition will surely be considered a benchmark assessment of twentieth-century industrial design, even though its promise to reveal industrial design since 1945 is boastful. Any art museum attempting to show such a big picture of the state of current industrial design faces problems, considering the vast panorama of products that should be included, and the Philadelphia show is no exception. Such monsters as airplanes and industrial machinery, for example, must wait for the budgets and indiscriminate commercialism of world's fairs. (For museums, photographs and models must usually suffice.) The display of photographic and medical equipment, where so much impressive work has been done, is limited not by size, but by complexity. Although the layman may be prevailed upon to admire the "form" of the more complex items, only a specialist could judge them rightly. Such samplings serve to indicate the ramifications of industrial design more than they help the layman identify what may be "good" in them.

In any event, the Philadelphia show, like many of its museum-sponsored predecessors, is limited to industrial design for household objects. And not all of these. Sport and leisure equipment, ranging from the tennis racquet and gardening trowel to the motorboat beached for the winter in the backyard, can be found around the house but not in the Philadelphia show. And for good reason. This category is so exceptionally rambunctious and so ramified that it requires a show of its own, as large as the roughly four hundred and twenty-five objects in the Philadelphia show, if it is to be covered at all. For the same reasons, packaging in the pantry, medicine closet, and boudoir, and clothes in the closet are set aside here. This exhibition has problems enough in sorting out for special notice nearly four decades of lamps, furniture, fabrics, small appliances, and kitchen- and tableware. Indeed, these constitute the familiar domain of the decorative arts.

So the big picture becomes rather small, after all. But the very fact that this show continues in the classic pattern of the genre at least makes it comparable to those that have preceded it. Thus, it establishes a kind of layman's index for what is good, right, and current in progressive industrial design. Moreover, it is this range of products that can be understood in terms of everyday experience. In them, too, whatever is trendy is automatically set against a tradition that reaches back to the furthest recesses of human history. If there is to be a measure of what might be functionally and aesthetically "right" in objects designed for human use during any particular interval in history, this kind of show will provide it. These objects, designed for such essential acts as sitting, sleeping, eating, and lighting, provide the core of any understanding of evolving notions of rightness in industrial design.

George Nelson, by now one of the deans of the profession, designed the handsome installation of "Design Since 1945." One

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enters through a crescent of lamps strikingly displayed against purple walls with a single band (or perhaps beam) of yellow to preserve a sense of the structure of the space, and provide a zone for labels. (Roughly half the lamps are on when one enters. When one is partway through the gallery, these shut off and the others come on. It is a nice piece of display drama; it shows the lights in their two states and reduces the competition among them.) Then, the wind of the spectator's path enters a blander gray-tan realm, back and forth in a slow slalom through the furniture. The arrangement is roughly chronological, but with exceptions in order to group related approaches. At the end of the path, a circle of black cases, each topped with a tall, hollow, pointed niche, painted yellow and spotlighted, creates an appropriate climactic burst for the domestic high-tech of small appliances, typewriters, televisions, hi-fi's and home computers. To one side, a circular island perfunctorily celebrates bathroom and kitchen. On the way out, an undulating red case the length of the exhibition area displays table and kitchen ware, roughly inverting chronology from the present back to 1945. Along the way, fabrics serve as backdrops, banners, and occasionally as massed cascades. Along the way, too, showcases lift some of the heroes of recent industrial design out of the customary anonymity of the profession. Overhead, more as decorative hurrah for industrial design than as part of the exhibition, float such glamorous products of the moment as the model of a communications satellite, a hang glider, and the body of the newly redesigned Corvair (white, with an all-over pattern of pin-stripe squares, like exploded graph paper).

Clearly there are two ways to look at the exhibition. One way is simply to admire the spill of the cornucopia. Mercifully, the objects and their arrangement mostly speak for themselves, appearing without the didactic comment that leads the viewer to a "predigested" point of view. The second way is to search for trends. Here one turns hopefully to Kathryn Hiesinger's informative and handsome catalogue.[2] Her excellent introductory survey of the period precedes a series of short general essays by leading designers of the period, a portfolio of selected objects (arranged chronologically), more essays by designers introducing each category of product, and finally, a series of biographies of designers. Unfortunately, as revealing and rewarding as Miss Hiesinger's coverage of the history of industrial design since 1945 is, she says little about the trends evident in the objects on view except allusively, in certain captions.

In fact, the big picture of industrial design since 1945 that emerges in Philadelphia ends up as a montage of smaller pictures. To the interested layman, the most revealing trends are likely to be in lamps and furniture. The long ribbon of kitchen- and tableware, for example, changes too little from one end to the other. Forms change, by the mid-Sixties tending toward some forcing for idiosyncratic effect; but the craft tradition remains so strong in these objects that the overall effect is more one of stasis with variation than substantial change. Seeing such a spread of kitchen-and tableware, one finds it difficult to fight off the feeling that one has inadvertently wandered into an exquisite version of those "modern life" sections in department stores or their real equivalents in "preserved" commercial precincts from Quincy Market to Ghirardelli Square.

Fabrics also are too strongly rooted in their craft tradition to provide much sense of what may be especially innovative about their role in the house since World War II. Thus, in the Philadelphia show they tend to recede to the role of backdrop ambience for other objects. At the opposite extreme, there is high-tech design. Judging these products by the shape of their casing and the legibility of their instrumentation seems excessively superficial for things designed for precise mechanical and electronic function. Three typewriters are bound to be less informative

2 *Design Since 1945,* by Kathryn B. Hiesinger. Rizzoli, 251 pages, $17.95.

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about trends than roughly ninety chairs and forty lamps. It barely helps that the visible properties of the typewriters are perhaps meant to be augmented by comparable properties in three hi-fi sets and two calculators, as though all of these objects were somehow the same sort of product.

In the era of "good design" it seemed that primal shapes alleged to be appropriate to the traditional crafts on the one hand and to the machine on the other provided a unifying theme for modern design. Of course, this perception is not wholly wrong, at least with respect to the visible aspects of high-tech design products, which is what the exhibition shows. It is revealing (in a double sense) that the only innards shown in the high-tech selection are in Daniel Weil's novelty "Bag" radio (1981), where the colorful parts are simply tossed into a plastic bag (labeled "radio") as a kind of abstract expressionist image.

High-tech design "of museum quality" does depend on elemental geometrical shapes, some of it making a fetish of the fact. From the beginning of the period surveyed, George Nelson's familiar wall clock for Herman Miller (1949) is a plain circular disc surrounded by radiating spikes on the ends of which occur twelve painted wooden balls, with a triangle and an oval to mark the time. Toward the end of the period, Mario Bellini's "Totem" radio and record player (1971) is a cube when closed; but the top half splits into two boxes that pivot from two corners of the base, each exposing three speakers from woofer to tweeter in perfect circles to echo the turntable brought into view between them. In both instances pure geometry opens or unpacks to more pure geometry, doubtless making the objects especially beguiling for museum selection. Although a recurrent approach to high-tech design, such *tours de force* of pure geometry are bound to seem, as these products do, on the one hand decorative and even a little cute, on the other so committed to pure form that one instinctively distrusts their performance.

Typically for high-tech products, the design problem is not one that can be incarcerated so neatly into the elemental geometry of cubes, cones, spheres, and cylinders (a neatness inherently more suitable for dinner plates and vases). Instead, most high-tech products demand the adjustment of one form tending toward a simple geometrical shape with another so that all parts are clearly organized for sight and use but also integrated as a whole. Even where the parts are "free form" and meant to fit the finger (as in a computer key) or the hand (as in a telephone), their final shaping is habitually adjusted toward ideal geometrical shapes, or ordered by refinement toward segments of ideal curves. So it is the *play* of pure geometric form—its contrast, its fusion, and its melding—into an operating entity for specific function which is characteristic of high-tech design.

There are four formal preoccupations that are both particular to the class of object in the Philadelphia show and especially illuminating to the time span covered. The first is framed composition, which characterizes much industrial design in the late Forties. In the exhibition, it is emphatically represented only by Raymond Loewy's successive designs for a table radio and television set for Hallicrafters (1945 and 1948). The overt design problem, which is what the layman is aware of in these objects, is the box-like encasement making a "front," which is often (as here in the television set) literally recessed into a frame. On this plane (or within this frame), the designer arranges circles, cylinders, and rectangles for such elements as the speaker (or image from the picture tube), the dials, and plates for toggle switches, brand-name identification, and so on. With such a method of working, the designer composes a kind of consumer's picture of function and operation.

Free-form, curvilinear encasement—the second formal preoccupation—appears during the same years, but proliferates during the Fifties and (if this selection truly characterizes developments) dwindles away after 1965. This was perhaps the high moment of

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"organicism" as an ideal in postwar industrial design, for which curvilinear free forms are the appropriate expression. The free form may be ergonomic in origin, which is a professional term that applies to what used to be called "human engineering" in the United States during World War II, when this approach to design received widespread use in such tasks as the fitting of pilots to cockpits. Care for the "human factors" in instruments of destruction was supposed to increase the efficiency of both soldier and machine. Ergonomics is the specific fit of form to human use, as, for example, in Gio Ponti's toilet for Ideal Standard of Italy (1954), where the bowl thrusts out toward the user like the beak of an alert bird. The metaphor may seem too poetic for its mundane referent, but Ponti's toilet is possibly the single most sculptural form in the show. Toward the end of this flurry of ergonomic free form, Henry Dreyfuss's "Trimline" telephone (1965) provides a more familiar example.

The sculptural quality of these products, in which the organic determinant is disciplined toward the appeal of pure geometry, can become total, as in Angelo Mangiarotti's "Secticon" table clock (1962), in which a slightly tapered cylindrical base rises and swells to a tilted bowl-like shape (not unlike a miniature washbasin), which holds the clock face. Or the curvilinear free form may take its shape from the dominant function of the object, like the support of Gerd Müller's kitchen mixer for Braun (1957), which complements the tapered roundness and spin of the bowl. Or it may directly wrap the object, as in the first portable transistor television set by Sony (1959), which consists of the tapered wrap of the picture tube and a handle for carrying. Control buttons hang in a block off the bottom; a pivoting frame beneath angles the picture toward the viewer. Or, finally, the free form can assume the looser, more independent role of curvilinear encasement, as in Marcello Nizzoli's "Lexicon 80" typewriter for Olivetti (1948). These curved forms shroud the works, with a slotted opening in which the carriage and its burden of mechanical elements (turning knobs for the platen, lever for line shift, and paper guide) appear, together with a framed opening into which the keys are suspended.

Portability is very much a postwar concern for high-tech household objects, which of course such inventions as the transistor (1946) and the information storage chip have vastly encouraged. Transistorized radios and television sets are, together with mini-computors, bellwether products in the trend toward portability. Although it is not quite fair to compare the picture-frame approach to the table radio or television (with its composition of operational parts) to such portables as Dieter Rams's radio for Braun (1956), portability may be one source for a more three-dimensional approach to high-tech products. In portables the speaker is likely to be on one side of its small container, with operation on the edge. Dials in a Forties portable, as in Wells Coates's pioneering "Princess" (1947), give way to a row of buttons, closely packed and stubby. Their configuration and shape protect the buttons; they effect a snug integration of the operation with its compact housing; they suggest that operation is as much by feel as by sight. Gradation in volume or change of channel is likely to occur, as in Rams's design, by fingering a wheel that barely protrudes from the case. If portability and miniaturization encourage a minimal projection of controls in Rams's portable radio, the speaker tends no longer to be celebrated as the climactic geometric entity in a composition of such entities. Rather, it appears as a perforated pattern in the surface of the container, a development found in the Forties to be sure (for example, in Coates's design), but far more prevalent later on. Thermal keyboards operating from the heat of the touch, as in Bellini's "Divisumma 18" calculator for Olivetti (1973), are the ultimate effort to integrate operation with housing—although there have been complaints that users miss the familiar "give" of the keys.

Both portability and the miniaturization that makes more portability possible have

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tended to encourage a severity and simplicity in the form of the housing. Cowlings that veil mechanical operations and moving parts may encourage curved shapes, both to reduce the scale of the object and to blend the whole with those parts that protrude for direct contact with the user. But electronics seems to encourage simple, compact shapes, like pure reticulated shapes (parallelepipeds to geometers) or these shapes with rounded edges or corners. Such small, compact shapes are congenial for packing and travel. Portability also means handles or (taking a cue from the current and growing popularity for soft, knapsack-like luggage) shoulder straps. Strapping opposes the handle or harness to the high-tech instrument, perhaps humanizing its precision by providing a lighthearted sense of being on the road. Alternatively, the simple shape of plastic housing can seamlessly roll itself into a slot for being held, as in Rams's hand-held kitchen mixer for Braun (1968), or Hans Slany's knife sharpener (1974), or the Eureka "Mighty Mite" vacuum cleaner (1982).

A final trend to be noted in high-tech objects, especially characteristic of the most recent examples, is their focus on display. Compared to the sort of display epitomized by the computer screen, the compositional distribution of parts is a primitive form of pointing to function. In this exhibition, we can see the influence of the computer screen appearing in a non-computer product like Eliot Noyes's "Selectric" typewriter for IBM (1961), where the curved forms of the casing (still in the "organic" mode) provide a sculptured hollow for the tilted plane of the keyboard. The moving ball of type, replacing the moving carriage, eliminates most of the traditional gadgets from the platen area of the machine, the better to emphasize the keyboard. No longer do the keys read as rows of individual keys, as in the Lexicon Olivetti. Here, like the buttons on Rams's portable radio, they appear as a field of closely packed, rectangular elements, ergonomically eroded to the touch and seeming to invite the pass of the hand rather than the touch of the finger. By the Seventies the angled plane of the computer screen had all but eliminated curvilinear free forms for typewriters, as current IBM models (not in the show) or Bellini's "Praxis 35" portable for Olivetti (1981) illustrate. Or one can compare the handsome curves of Marcello Nizzoli's "Mirella" portable sewing machine for Necchi (1957) with the current "Logica" model for the same product (1981) by Giorgetto Giugiaro. The angularity of the "Logica" is surely less handsome, and more impersonal, than the sweeping curves of its predecessor—with all the differences implicit in the shift from "Mirella" to "Logica." The angularity of the latter takes its cue from the tilted plane of the computer-like panel that presents the user with the array of possibilities the machine offers, all for the "programming." In television sets, the screen itself now swells to fill its case to the full, with buttons for operating all but invisible. Philadelphia notes the trend with a Sony "Profeel" component television system (1979). Alternatively, in recent hi-fi sets especially, the information on sliding indicators seemingly approaches infinity, with row after row of buttons and switches for fine, super-fine, and super-super-fine tuning—even as gimmicky "high performance" cars begin to offer continuous monitoring of operations, presenting all sorts of unnecessary information for its own sake. As the array of buttons, dials, switches, and readings increases, the compositional ordering of elements explodes into sheer display, however meticulously composed the display may be.

What is seen as the concerns of high-tech design in this exhibition is not what is seen in the pots and pans and fabrics. Nor is what is seen in these two segments of the show what is seen in the furniture. There is not space here to consider all the furniture or the lamps (which is a pity, because they receive exceptionally fine coverage). By way of a final sampling of observations from the exhibition, let us concentrate on the favorite object in such shows as this. In industrial design, chairs locate themselves somewhere

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between the poles of craft and high-tech design, sometimes inclining toward one, sometimes toward the other, and sometimes going their own way.

The key innovations in chair design immediately following World War II were the chairs by Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen that made their prototype debut in the MOMA "Organic Design" show of 1941. Between 1945 and 1948, the definitive versions of these experimental chairs appeared: Eames's perky combination of bent plywood ovals for back and seat floated off an angled and curved supporting frame of chrome rods; Saarinen's molded fiberglass "Womb" armchair cradled into a bent metal frame; and finally there was Eames's less luxurious variant of Saarinen's chair. Had nothing else resulted from the MOMA exhibitions through 1955, these chairs would have justified the effort. Of course, curved forms had appeared previously in modern chair design, conspicuously in Alvar Aalto's bent plywood furniture in the early Thirties, while Mies van der Rohe had projected his Conchoidal seat of plastic in 1942. But the Eames and Saarinen chairs initiated a freedom of forming the seat in a floating relationship with a markedly contrasting frame which called particular attention to the exceptional shapes. As the buzzword for what seemed most progressively "modern" in the years immediately after World War II, these curved shapes struck everyone as self-evidently "organic." Miro-like, Arp-like, Calder-like, such forms could also be expected to bring a new congeniality to modern design. Literally and ideologically they opposed the harsher austerities of earlier modernism. If the curvilinear free forms of these chairs seem to have been a potent influence in the use of similar kinds of form in high-tech objects from 1950 to 1965—more potent at that moment than residual "streamlining" from the 1930s—Eames and Saarinen chairs also represented innovative technology on their own. Both aspects, shape and technology, inspired a number of chairs related to theirs. Typically, in these the fairly normative forms in Eames's and Saarinen's examples took on more exaggerated shapes, whether by Arne Jacobsen (1957), Franco Albini (1950), Harry Bertoia (1954), or the Lavernes, Erwine and Estelle (1952), just as idiosyncratic shaping is also apparent in the kitchen- and tableware of the period.

In chairs, this forcing of shapes continues in a more evident manner than in pots, pans, and high-tech products. So does the sense of relaxation. Pop art and the rage for informality during the decade of the Sixties pushed these trends in radical ways in chair design. The funky appears in inflatable furniture, represented here by the first example, a fat armchair in pink transparent plastic by the Milan firm of De Pas, D'Urbino, Lomazzi (1967), one of the more difficult pieces to come by for the exhibition, since most of the originals had long ago been punctured. Related to the bloated flab of this design, all sorts of "soft" furniture appeared, most wrapped in the new stretch fabrics. The pillow went wild, and puffed itself up into full-blown armchairs. There was the much imitated "Sacco" beanbag chair (1965) by Gatti, Paolini, Teodoro, a Turin firm. In his Malitte "cushion system" (1966), Roberto Matta fitted a jigsaw of shapes into a foam-rubber, stretch-covered wall in which an ovoid is surrounded by an interlocked frame of undulant "L" and "T" shapes. These can be unstacked, tossed here and there about the room as chairs, recliners and hassocks, then returned to their storage state as a soft sculptural slab. (In a related development, the same decade saw a fetish for ingenious stacking chairs, with four variants in the show, which also congeal into pseudo-sculpture when stashed away.) The soft trend continues into the Seventies. Alessandro Becchi's convertible overstuffed sofa (1970) unfolds like a sleeping bag to become a bed. Vico Magistretti used slab-like cushions for his "Maralunga" chair (1973), which simply fold over themselves to create an armchair that recalls a half-opened corrugated carton when no one is in the seat to hold down the flaps. Gaetano Pesce's "Sit Down" chair (1975) looks like a

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gridded quilt that has slumped into an armchair. With their "Joe" chair (1970), De Pas *et al.* invite collapse into an outsized fielder's mitt.

At the same time the ribbon appears in various guises as a chair. In Pierre Paulin's "Ribbon" chair (1966) a padded ribbon rises vertically from a base, curves flat to make half a seat, twists on itself to make a back, and repeats this Christmas-candy maneuver to create the other half of the chair back down to the base. Cesare Leonardi-Franca Stagi (1967) use a tobaggan-like strip of fiberglass in a long curve as a rocking element on the floor, which rolls around into a kind of seat-like flutter at one end of the ribbon, with feet to be placed on the other end to power the rocking. Using plastic impregnated laminated cross sections of corrugated cardboard, Frank Gehry creates his "Easy Edges" rocker (1972) from a variant ribbon shape. Olivier Mourgue uses a padded ribbon of fiberglass for his "Djinn" lounger (1965) which rises from the floor to a sagging bridge of space fitted to the recumbent body, then dives back to the floor. This recliner with its attached billet pillow snakes its way as an out-of-focus image across the two covers of the exhibition catalogue. It is a far cry, indeed, from Johnson's ball bearings!

Finally, the Sixties also see the prominence of plastic furniture. Funky playfulness appears in highly colored, stamped plastic chairs which call on archetypal children's images of "chair" for playroom counterparts (1964) by Marco Zanuso and Richard Sapper. A stamped sheet of plastic folds and curves into a cantilevered structure to make Verner Panton's stacking chairs (1960). Alberto Rosselli's "Jumbo" chair (1970) recalls a giant Chiclet hollowed and bent into a chair, while Eero Aarnio's "Gyro" chair (1968) is a hollowed plastic egg that rocks.

At one point only in this labyrinth of chairs is the viewer invited to sit on a cluster of upholstered desk chairs by one of the leading ergonomists in the seating field, Niels Diffrient. Several of his "Helena" chairs for Sunar and his "Advanced Operational" model for Knoll (1968 and 1969) adjust to the individual's height, with the tilt of the back and the plane of the seat pressing in on the body to insure support at every move of the sitter.

Most of these trends continue into the Seventies with what is potentially the most radical shift of all. Thus far, no matter how extravagantly the "chair" concept has been pummeled into new interpretations, its form has been determined by process and (except for the most flumpy soft pieces and some of the ribbons) has stayed close to the simple geometries of early modern design. So effective has the innoculation of "good design" been!

In the Seventies, however, new strains of virus appear which are resistant to the old innoculation. "Design Since 1945" barely edges into this new territory, which is another manifestation of what is broadly referred to today as Postmodernism. One part of the new strain is historicism. Michael Graves's armchair (1981) is an example. Part Empire, part Wiener Werkstätte, and part Art Deco movie palace, this mix of historical allusion (and possibly some others) is all worked into a piquant opposition of curves, angles, and tapers that gives it an assembled quality. Sheer fantasy is the other part of the new strain. No longer is it the controlled fantasy of the Djinn recliner, which is explicable in the old technological terms, however "decadent" its image might appear to the old-fashioned, hardline, polemical modernist. Thus, a chair like Paolo Deganello's "Torso" lounge chair (1982) defies verbal description: but try to imagine three tightly fitted cushions in pale gray creating the presumed torso, one upright and curved as a head, the second horizontal and sunken, the third horizontal and raised, but tapered at one end in a long descending curve, off which floats a semicircular wooden tray. Various pipe legs, both vertical and canted (reminiscent of the Eames and Saarinen chairs), support this upholstered odalisque. And rising in an angled and curved plane behind it is an undulating fan or cockscomb of stretched, but draped,

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fabric in irridescent squares and stripes of pale blues, golds, and a medium gray. "The theme of this project," its designer tells us, "is the dialogue between an animate body, and that of the inanimate body, produced industrially." It is as beguiling in its elegant perversity as furniture by Bugatti.

The catalogue neatly provides a dialogue of its own between Max Bill and Ettore Sottsass, Jr. The one, an adherent of the old modernism, established a short-lived school of design in Ulm as a postwar reincarnation of Bauhaus ideals. The other, a leader in the current Italian avant-garde and an advocate of the new mod, is one of the organizers of the currently prominent Memphis group of designers in Milan. In the exhibition a sunlamp (1950) typifies Bill's approach, with its parabolic spun aluminum housings for base and shade linked by a flexible metal tube to carry the wire and permit free adjustment of the light. At the opposite extreme, Sottsass's tall, slender, stridently colored "Casablanca" sideboard (1981), typifies his approach. Its doors and drawers are white and yellow, framed in crimson, and mottled in a sort of leopard spotting all over. The crimson frame bristles with projecting shelves which, in conjunction with the vertical stance of the piece, take on a figural quality, as of gesturing arms. Two of the arms are horizontal, like any projecting shelf. The rest are variously angled to hold racked wine bottles. At the top, the angles make a mimic crown for this humanoid presence.

The products—Bill's lamp and Sottsass's sideboard—represent widely divergent approaches to design. In the catalogue both reply to the same questions. Here is a sample.

Question: What are the qualities of good design? Bill: "Good design depends on the harmony established between the form of an object and its use." Sottsass: "This is a question that supposes a Platonic view of the situation, that is, it supposes that somewhere, somehow, there is a place where GOOD DESIGN is deposited. The problem then is to come as close as possible to that 'good design.' My idea instead is . . . to design, keeping as near as possible to the anthropological state of things, which, in turn, is to be as near as possible to the need a society has for an image of itself."

Question: What is the value of enduring design in a society that plans obsolescence? Bill: "Every object made in an appropriate form retains its value through its inherent quality. It is economical; it is not considered as waste." Sottsass: ". . . If a society plans obsolescence, the only possible enduring design is one that deals with that obsolescence, a design that comes to terms with it, maybe accelerating it, maybe confronting it, maybe ironizing it, maybe getting along with it. The only design that does not endure is the one that in such a society looks for metaphysics, looks for the absolute, for eternity . . . . I don't understand why pyramids are better than Burmese straw huts. I don't understand why the president's speeches are better than love whispering in a room at night. When I was young I gathered information only from fashion magazines or from very ancient, forgotten, destroyed, dusty civilizations. I gathered information from those areas where life is either just germinating or from the nostalgia of life . . . . So I must admit that obsolescence for me is just the sugar of life." And so on.

So where does "Design Since 1945" leave us? Even within the narrow purview of the range of industrial design that the exhibition examines, its postwar development reveals that nothing so broadly accepted as the old-fashioned notion of "good design" now prevails. Yet the triple virtues of "good design"—concern for function, revelation of process and materials, and the expression of these in lucid form derived from basic geometrical shapes—strongly persist in the sampling of objects in Philadelphia. If these ideals appear most prominently in such craft-oriented fields of design as pots, pans and fabrics, they are also evident in high-tech design and in much of the furniture. Of the three canons of "good design," however, the one which has altered most is, as might be

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expected, that which is most arbitrary. The shaping of products since the war is far less rigidly cued to the Platonic ideal of the "goodness" of some universal realm of ultimate form, to which particular objects should ideally aspire.

Whether or not this is its intention, "Design Since 1945" suggests that no single "big picture" is possible for industrial design since World War II. Even within the narrow purview of this exhibition, it appears that the trends one finds, and more importantly the emphases and concerns, vary with the products examined. Sottsass's mottled cupboard has no equivalent among the high-tech products. Nor does Michael Graves's mock history. Nor does one find the bizarre aspects of some of the recent furniture in equally bizarre choices for table and kitchen ware. Nor for all the daring of the recent lamps (had we looked at them) is there a Sottsass sort of design among them.

A survey of the state of industrial design today (or tomorrow) might better begin with a consideration of the different kinds of problems that the industrial designer confronts. It would seem that designers increasingly move in different enclaves even within such a limited domain as elitist household design. Such pluralism of approach among various categories of products in home furnishings suggests a more challenging approach for future "Design Since . . ." ventures, if "design" and not merely "domestic design" is to be surveyed. The design of the latest *haut couturier* in home furnishings may, in a compartmented presentation, like that in Philadelphia, seem to have little relation to more socially aware design concerned with some Third World problem, or with help for the handicapped, or even with such wonderful household devices as the double-handled cane with wheels into which the old-fashioned baby buggy collapses. But the theme of portability could include outstanding examples of products designed for all these strata of use. An exhibition organized around a cluster of *themes* important in design since 1945 would give a truer picture of recent achievement than the Philadelphia show does. Exhibitions of industrial design need to give more attention to problems (portability) that have generated diverse solutions and less attention to products as a class (furniture) or type (chair). So do museum collections. It is not an original idea, for there have been many shows on single themes, such as portability. But has the achievement of any period in industrial design yet been revealed in terms of the major functional, social, and symbolic issues it addressed, with a sampling of the best solutions that have met these challenges?

All of which is not to denigrate the handsome and thought-provoking exhibition in Philadelphia, nor to suggest that this important addition to the long roster of museum exhibitions of home furnishings should be the last of this valuable and deservedly popular genre. It is merely to speculate on a possible alternative for the periodic measure of an encompassing profession.

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Theater

Marilyn, my Marilyn

by Mimi Kramer

What is it that makes Marilyn Monroe one among that number of people who, despite all their best efforts, seem unable to die? Why is she still with us? Why does she continue to preoccupy the national consciousness? Does she in fact preoccupy the national consciousness? And if so, what on earth does that mean?

It was in an attempt to answer some of these questions for myself that I went to see *Marilyn: An American Fable.* This is not the first time Norma Jean Baker has engaged the artistic imagination, of course. Warhol has painted her, Mailer has written fulsomely about her, and Arthur Miller (one of her husbands) has made her the subject of a play, *After the Fall.* Even Elton John, coming somewhat after the fact, has been moved to pay tribute. His fairly insipid lyrics are worth quoting here if only to illustrate Marilyn's legendary status in the Spiritual Hall of Fame of popular consciousness. "Goodbye, Norma Jean," he begins, "though I never knew you at all."

> And it seems to me that you lived your life
> Like a candle in the wind:
> Never knowing where to turn to when the rain set in;
> And I would have liked to have known you
> But I was just a kid.
> Your candle burned out long before your legend ever did.

Who was Norma Jean Baker that Elton John felt he had to say goodbye to her? For that matter, what did she represent to the British playwright Terry Johnson, in whose recent play *Insignificance* she figured prominently (along with Albert Einstein, Joseph McCarthy, and Joe DiMaggio)? What did she mean to the critics who acclaimed the play so highly and to all the people who flocked to see it? Finally, what did Norma Jean Baker mean to Malcolm Cooke, William May, Dolores Quinton, James Kabler, Joseph DioGuardi, Harper Sibley, Jane Curtis, and Renee Blau who—in association with Jerome Minskoff—produced *Marilyn: An American Fable*? What did she represent to Patricia Michaels, who wrote the book and to Jeanne Napoli, Doug Frank, Gary Portnoy, Beth Lawrence, and Norman Thalheimer, all of whom, evidently, wrote the music and lyrics?

One thing she did not end up representing was success. The sign on Forty-fifth Street that pointed toward the theater entrance bore two words: MATINEE TODAY, with an arrow and no notice posted, no attempt even to advertise the name of the show. It was like something out of a film set for a movie about a show that's going to close. Which was not surprising. *Marilyn* had elicited some of the year's nastiest reviews from critics of every stamp: nice ones, mean ones, timid ones, and brave. At *The New York Times,* Frank Rich had written his most damning (and funniest) review since he anchored the safety curtain on *Moose*

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Murders last year. When I asked, the man in the box office could only produce one favorable review, a notice from an entertainment circular which began, "The critics haven't had much good to say about *Marilyn: An American Fable,* but . . ." The theater was half-empty, understandably. Nevertheless, it was with a sense of anticipation that I took my seat, dead center in the last row of the balcony. I had never been to one of those shows that the critics close in virtually a single night and I wanted to see what theatrical disaster looked like.

Marilyn: An American Fable was the most interesting theatrical experience I have had yet this season. Not because it was good; it wasn't. But because it was nowhere near as bad as the critics made out. Not even close. Nothing I encountered in the two and a half hours I spent at the Minskoff Theater seemed to me capable of offending on a grand scale. Granted, the book was pretty simple-minded; true, the songs were pretty trite. But there was, it seemed to me, as much invention and intelligence in the staging of one production number from *Marilyn* as there was in a whole evening's worth of *La Cage aux folles.* And a good deal less in the way of dishonesty. In fact, compared with the uningenious sentimentality of *Annie* or the clumsy trumpery of *La Cage aux folles,* I thought that *Marilyn* came off looking rather well.

The plot took a selective approach to the details of Marilyn Monroe's life, omitting and including on a fairly arbitrary basis. Norma Jean's first husband was the excuse for a lively jitterbug number and a brief foray overseas with the U. S. Armed Forces. And the show's creators did not see fit to tell us what became of him before propelling the re-christened Marilyn into the waiting arms of Joe DiMaggio. Still, the story the show was trying to piece together was essentially the familiar one: the tortured matinee idol searching for love and identity in the adulation of the crowd, drifting from ballplayer to playwright, only to discover that success was not enough, that she was unable to transcend the role in which she had allowed society to cast her. Joe wanted, apparently, to love her, protect her, shelter her, and keep her safe; as for Arthur, her fragile beauty made him feel "like a giant of a man." Lines like, "All my life I've never belonged anywhere," "Sooner or later the fans find a new idol; then who've you got?" "She wants to control her career, but she doesn't: we do!" were high points in the script, although Marilyn's cry in the wilderness—"You're Arthur Miller! How can you be so boring?"—was perhaps my favorite.

This is not brilliant entertainment, but how did that make *Marilyn* any different or any worse than the two or three other naïve, silly, unimaginative, and retrograde musicals that the critics smile on every season? Besides, the performances were good, and buried somewhere under all the Easy Listening Music and the WPAT lyrics lay the ghost of an idea. Which, on both counts, was more than you could say for a musical like *La Cage aux folles.* Beneath the chaotic confusion brought to you by too many people with too little to say was the suggestion that the subtitle of *Marilyn: An American Fable* had once been ironic and that someone's idea, originally, had been to say to Marilyn Monroe: "Goodbye, Norma Jean. Yes, goodbye already."

Marilyn failed to take a consistent attitude toward its heroine, but at least some of its sequences invited us to look askance at Norma Jean and the values she represented. And if the production numbers were derivative, there were places where they were probably intended to be so—allusions rather than borrowings. At some long forgotten point, it seemed, the purpose had been to offer a self-conscious commentary on Show Biz and its world view: the dream of overnight success and universal fame. Unfortunately, along the way other purposes found their way into the production, creating inconsistencies. Alongside caricature scenes of Norma Jean sighing and groaning and undulating for the camera were scenes where we were clearly meant to take joy in her successes and pleasure in the fulfillment of her dream.

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The inconsistencies were not quite clever enough to be ambivalence or hypocrisy: they seemed the result of honest confusion and bad rewriting. What made them interesting was the way they unintentionally interacted with what was happening in real life in the theater. The opening sequence, for example, used a classic Show Biz musical topos: the little girl with a dream of stardom. Eleven-year-old Kristi Coombs stood with her Teddy bear by a window frame starkly suspended from the flies at center stage:

> Teddy, you see that star?
> I've picked it for my own.
> It follows me everywhere:
> From home to home to home.

So saying, she proceeded to establish with astonishing vocal competence just about everything you needed to know (for the purposes of this musical) about the character and fate of Marilyn Monroe:

> Movie stars are loved
> They're loved by everyone;
> And I want to be loved and wanted
> Just the way they are . . . .

It was one of the saddest sights I have ever encountered in a theater: the little girl in the pink dress and white ankle socks belting it out on an empty stage. But it was calculated to be sad; it had to be, because you knew what was going to happen. Consequently, when three suspicious looking characters in inconceivably gaudy silk and tails descended on a pile of scaffolding and, in close harmony, introduced themselves as Destiny and promised the little girl to remain forever at her side, when they slipped an even more impossibly gaudy tutu over her head and lead her around in a travesty of a Ginger Rogers dance routine, you could not see this sequence as anything but a nasty trick on little Norma Jean Baker and on all the little girls in musicals and movie-musicals who have yearned competently in song for anything.

On the other hand, there stood Kristi Coombs performing with that shamelessly unselfconscious love of audience adoration that characterizes the appearance of the child star. In short, there was Kristi Coombs making her career before your very eyes. What were we to think of that? By Act II, the scale had changed, but the theme had not. On stage a whole group of young people were, as theatrical parlance has it, "giving their all" and making a pretty good job of it, considering what they had to work with. With each trite solo, after each unremarkable dance number, the audience's applause became more enthusiastic. In the ovation at the end of the afternoon there seemed a kind of defiance, a desire to beat the critics at their own game and to wish on the performers the success that had made Marilyn Monroe's life such a failure.

If *Marilyn: An American Fable* did not shed much light on what it is that makes a Broadway show intolerable, it did suggest one or two things about the nature of Marilyn Monroe's appeal. More than anything else, I think, Marilyn Monroe represents to some the failure of society to recognize her for what she was. Again and again that is what these portrayals of her life seem to keep coming back to: the extent to which Marilyn Monroe was miscast in the role of "Dumb Blonde." It is as though they feel that, of Anita Loos's two heroines in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes,* Marilyn could, in real life, have played the Jane Russell figure, Dorothy, rather than Lorelei, the role she actually played. If only society had let her. The Mailers, the Terry Johnsons, and the Elton Johns all seem to make the same promise to the spirit of Marilyn Monroe: had *they* been around, *they* would have seen the quality of the mind that lay beneath the peroxide hair.

Of course, just how nimble a mind Marilyn Monroe possessed is anybody's guess. It may be that—as Terry Johnson suggests—she could have explained relativity to Einstein. It seems a bit more likely, though, that the persona Monroe actually found for herself was the furthest she could get from the role she wanted to escape. Unable to

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become what she wanted to be, she had to settle for becoming a caricature of what she was afraid she was.

Marilyn: An American Fable was like its heroine in this sense: the failure of neither was particularly tragic since neither was striving to attain anything particularly noble or valuable. Success, as a subject for tragic failure, like success as an object of desire, simply does not make it.

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Books

The skin of his teeth

by Vernon Young

I cannot believe that the reputation of Thornton Wilder, either as a novelist or as a playwright, has not suffered a greater diminution than Gilbert Harrison has implied by writing Wilder's biography.[1] We should be grateful that he has done so. There is no necessary connection between the rank of a writer's professional achievement and the interest attaching to his day-by-day existence. Harrison has given Wilder's life a unique interest simply by organizing its sequences with copious documentation, notably from Wilder's personal correspondence. As a result, Harrison has uncovered, very far from his intention, I'm sure, a dumbfoundingly consistent history of self-concealment.

Those who think of Wilder as principally the author of that bare-stage, bare-language attempt to find big meanings in limited circumstance, *Our Town* (1938), will need the reminder that Wilder had made an extraordinarily successful debut as a stylist in prose fiction twelve years earlier, with a curious pastiche, *The Cabala* (the final version of what had first been entitled *Memoirs of a Roman Student*). Past and present overlap in this self-consciously erudite fable of one year in the Eternal City centered on a handful of somewhat decadent characters who Wilder claimed were inspired less by his firsthand observations in Italy than by his reading of Proust, La Bruyère, Saint-Simon, Thomas Mann, and Lytton Strachey. (It became Wilder's custom to call attention to the scope of his researches by the pretense of modestly exposing his indebtedness.) Considering that the puritan hero, returning to the United States, exchanges imaginary dialogue with Virgil, who tells him that Rome is dying and he should "seek out some city that is young," we can safely add Dante and Henry James to Wilder's probable sources.

Critical approbation was unanimous at home. In the fervor of the Twenties, when the European-American dialectic was a crucial event for so many potential expatriates, *The Cabala* satisfied an urban need for the worldly European touch, leavened with the moral corrective implicit in the exile's return. For some years, a terminal sentence in this novel was as widely quoted as the famous last sentence of *The Great Gatsby*: "The shimmering ghost [of Virgil] faded before the stars, and the engines beneath me pounded eagerly toward the New World and the last and greatest of all cities." This resonant image encouraged readers with its conviction of finality and discovery, with its rejection of nostalgia for the Old World and loyalty to the pristine values of the New.

Any such identification of the book's hero with its author was not, however, justified in the sequel. Wilder's repudiation of Europe and the past was more sententious than authentic; before long he was re-crossing the Atlantic for another Grand Tour, establish-

1 *The Enthusiast: A Life of Thornton Wilder,* by Gilbert A. Harrison. Ticknor & Fields, 416 pages, $19.95

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ing a pattern to which he constantly returned: beginning a literary project in settled surroundings, then, for reasons which always presented themselves as plausible, escaping to one place after another more conducive to absolute concentration. In the summer of 1926, after publication of *The Cabala,* he began writing *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* at the MacDowell Colony; but by September, in need of more money than he was expecting from royalties of *The Cabala,* he accepted a well-paid commission to chaperon Andrew Townson, a young proto-student in need of culture, on a tour of European cities. With his unwilling charge in tow, Wilder visited not only cathedrals by the dozen but also a host of literary celebrities, in London, Oxford, Berlin, Rome, and Munich, all the while experiencing twinges of guilt for his postponement of *Bridge,* whose Peruvian characters were shadowing his spare moments. In Munich, the completely bored young Townson fled his avuncular presence, which of course meant for Wilder the end of the Townson funds on which he had been traveling.

From Paris, Wilder managed to squeeze a shamefully inadequate advance for the partly written *Bridge* from his publisher, Boni. Miserably homesick, he wrote his mother that his *pension* was uncomfortable, the French had no soul, American compatriots were self-sufficient, and if Mother didn't love him he would throw himself into a river or an ocean or a fire (Harrison's paraphrase). "I am not married and you're all I've got. I'm lonesome. That's all. I shall either drink and drink and drink, or come home. Which will you have?" That he neither drank and drank and drank nor, just yet, went home Harrison assures us. "Instead, he took the next train to the Riviera for a Christmas holiday at the Pension Saramantel in Juan-les-Pins" with a group of American Oxonians. In that same letter he had assured Mother that he was beginning to understand the conditions under which he could best work: "residence under foreign skies among few or casual friends is not one of them." "A remarkable statement," Harrison observes, "given that those were precisely the conditions under which much of his best work was done."

Down the years, Wilder recapitulated with variations this flight and retreat, with increasing means for doing so elaborately. Without the excuse of being imminently broke in Paris or any other European capital (his income from best-selling novels and plays was staggering), he repeated the emergency patriotism of his 1927 complaint and his renunciation of the international scene. Even so, the ecstatic and gossipy passages in the letters and journals, helpfully quoted by Harrison, are far more abundant than the countermands with which Wilder periodically put the brake on himself, as if it were sinful to enjoy without remorse the world of affluence, talent, and the eternal supper party. Beyond a point, Wilder could not very well predicate an opulent Epicurean Europe by contrast with an anonymous, middle-income America, the less so as he was wined and dined and applauded at a comparable social level in the United States. (Harrison's chapter, "Happy Years," allows us to infer that Wilder knew no one who wasn't in the Chicago social register or the international *Who's Who*). Yet, his stock evasion did tend to reserve America for the fundamental virtues of a provincial, anti-intellectual setting that in fact he had never inhabited.

It becomes increasingly difficult to decide which of Wilder's protests on this subject has in it a grain of candor. His adulation of Gertrude Stein (his Mother-away-from-Mother) may be one of them, but his enlisting her in a private conflict he had already settled or never seriously suffered from is, if comical, one of his least authentic exercises in flattery. At the height of his Stein-Toklas worship, he wrote to her, following their summer visit together in the Haute-Savoie, that he was now *mad* about America! "[And] you did that to me—my country, 'tis of thee. I always knew I loved it, but I never knew I loved it like this. Every Child's restaurant, every shoe-blacking parlor. I don't

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feel as if I ever had to leave it again. I was born into the best country in the world. Gertrude told me so." Lost on him, apparently, was the irony that he had learned love of country from a professional expatriate. And he chose not to remember that eight years had passed since he had accepted America on the persuasive recommendation of Virgil *redivivus.*

Far from being inspired by the great Gertrude, his transition in literature from the relatively exotic worlds of *The Cabala, The Bridge of San Luis Rey,* and *The Woman of Andros* to the dining rooms and trains, if not the blacking parlors, of America was under way by 1930 with his mini-versions of *Our Town,* the one-act plays *Happy Journey from Camden to Trenton, Pullman Car Hiawatha,* and others. The novel *Heaven's My Destination* had its genesis in 1932, was published in 1935, and was instantly a prodigious success, commercially and with influential critics (such as Edmund Wilson and Henry Seidel Canby). Scarcely a celebration of the America that had fathered the rhetoric of his prodigal-son idealism, this work is rather a satirical treatment. George Brush, a salvationist textbook salesman, personifies "a Short History of the American Mind raised by exaggeration into humor: Idealistic but unclear; really religious, but badly educated in religion." That was only one of many explanations offered by Wilder himself. In time he came to think of the book as a failure because he had intended it to serve as a hope "that a wise government would repair the appalling condition into which the country had [sunk]." An astonishing afterthought! certainly far from the account he had imparted earlier to Sigmund Freud (whom he had met in Vienna). To him he described the work as satirical because Freud had asked why on earth he wanted to write about an American religious fanatic: a subject which could not be treated poetically. No American critic at the time seems to have shared Wilder's belief that he had written a political reform novel; perhaps this is why Wilder complained that everyone had misunderstood him. If they had, it must be one of the most lucrative misunderstandings on record. That *Heaven's My Destination* sold a total of 187,318 copies (hardcover and paperback combined) by 1965 and was translated into eight languages including Punjabi is as mysterious to me as the 1935 ovation and Gilbert Harrison's present reluctance to join the unimpressed minority. Having tried in vain to reread it without skipping (I don't find the Western-highway America convincingly specified and George Brush is for me too boring to be funny), I favor Freud's opinion above all others.

We can infer (some of us can recall) that the acclaim given to *Our Town* is explainable by the contingency of its debut in 1938 (the year of Munich). Employing "Grover's Corners, New Hampshire," as a microcosm of community, Wilder appealed to the isolationist sentiment of many Americans for whom the wickedness of all those complicated Europeans and their burden of history invoked a reactionary allegiance to safe, sound, and indigenous limits, where "Europe" is confined to "Polish Town across the tracks" (in the words of the Stage Manager who explains the layout of the empty stage). As reassuring as the circumscribed social geography was the shortcut staging (Wilder's disingenuous version of the Noh play or the theater of Molière, which he had introduced in his one-act pieces): a few chairs and benches did duty for buildings or cemeteries, arched trellises were pushed onto the stage for garden settings, and in dumb-show the actors scatter imaginary food from imaginary aprons to imaginary chickens, a boy tosses a ball to "dizzying heights," bumps into "an Old Lady invisible to us," and the Stage Manager, relentlessly arch, concludes the first act with, "That's the end of the First Act, friends. You can go and smoke now, those that smoke." (Today, he could make this more excruciating by throwing in a warning from the Surgeon General.)

Nothing happens in this play. Oh, to be sure, birth, the penultimate hurdles, and death: these are narrated, rather than drama-

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tized, by the Stage Manager, and the generic scheme of the author was of course fatal to any individualizing of character. Nobody visibly suffers, nobody breaks down, nobody is passionate, wicked, or remorseful. Emily, who carries as much of the story as can be endowed with that substantive, dies and returns to earth but declines to stay because, in limbo, she has come to understand that everything has its place in the sequence of eternity; she has been loved and love conquers all regrets for the unlived life. While I realize that a play finally comes alive *in the theater,* through the impact of its personalities, I do think it needs paraphrasable content more sanguinary than this.

If you couple *Heaven's My Destination* with *Our Town* you will have Wilder's problem (as a writer on America) in simplified, if dual, form. In his letters and journals, he often expressed, with admirable impartiality, his confidence in the essential advantages of democratic America. When he attempted to embody his confidence in an imaginative statement, such as the novel or play, the impulse to ridicule became irrepressible. And the only alternative to such an attitude, on the score of which he felt guilty, was the opposite one, that of complete sentimental acceptance. Whatever else, these alternatives readily betray the parental division in Wilder's life. His father, Amos Parker Wilder, as he appears in the view supplied by Harrison's inclusion of his letters, was a pious chatterbox. Thornton's reaction to his sermonizing correspondence (when his father was in China with the American Consulate and Wilder was in America or in Europe with his mother) appears on the surface to have been even-tempered and forbearing, but resentment was very likely deeper than toleration.

Consequently, he turned to his mother, (who was no less incompatible with Amos Parker) for the understanding which he failed to get from the father figure. Against his more conscious inclination, however—a common phenomenon—he was impressed by the vein of iron in the puritan overseer of his childhood and youth. He never rid himself of the rage to moralize—he tamed it with exposure to the Sybaris of theater, café talk, and the world of art—and he never abandoned the lurking orthodoxy imposed on him by the Consul General at Shanghai, who had urged him to read and mark well *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Life of John Wesley* when he was thirteen. At the same time unable—I'd guess unwilling—to find emotional reciprocity with any woman save his mother and his sister, he adopted in his credo all those sublimations of carnality which crop up in his literature, from *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (much talk of transcendence of death by love) to *Theophilus North,* in which the dialogue suggests that its author had no conception of how men and women talk to one another under stress of emotion.

If *Heaven's My Destination* is in some ways a rebuke to Wilder's father or a parody of what remained in himself *of* Father, no wonder he contradicted every outside opinion that came too close for comfort. *Our Town* as surely absolved him from all suspicion of depreciating the grassroots American community and was well within the ambience of Mother's Day. But it was in the great first act of *The Skin of Our Teeth* that Wilder found the equilibrium that illustrates his finest gift. Up to a point, and speaking dramaturgically, it resembles *Our Town*: a skeletal and generalized subject staged without respect for the realistic convention. (As Euripidean voice, an Announcer takes the place of *Our Town*'s Stage Manager, and Wilder's script directions recommend a screen on the front curtain for projection of news and of substitutes for scenery.) *The Skin of Our Teeth,* as its author described it, is "a comedy about an Excelsior, New Jersey suburbanite, George Antrobus, his wife and two children with their maid Sabina [all 5,000 years old], how they survive fire, pestilence, the seven-year locusts, the ice age, the black pox and the double feature, a dozen wars and as many depressions." The first act, notably lighthearted, as perfect in its way as that of *Our Town* is negligible,

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opens with an announcement that The Society for Affirming the End of the World has, after special session, postponed the event for twenty-four hours. And this tone is sustained with greater ease than the whimsies of the earlier play. The wit is cosmopolitan, the Antrobus family is treated far less sparingly than the inhabitants of Grover's Corners, and Wilder's device of having the characters complain of their entrapment by the author is often quite comical.

> *Mrs. Antrobus* (to the maid): You've let the fire go out!—have you milked the mammoth?
> *Sabina*: I don't understand a word of this play. —Yes, I've milked the mammoth.

At the end of the act, with the Ice Age upon them, Sabina comes to the footlights and begs the audience: "Will you please start handing up your chairs? We'll need everything for this fire. Save the human race. (In the back of the auditorium, the sound of chairs being ripped up . . . .) Pass up your chairs, everybody. Save the human race."

If the play could have ended there, it would deserve the adulation which has been addressed to the whole; the episode is one of the most brilliant comic events in the American theater. Wilder had said in a one-act form all he had to say under the aspect of comedy about our compressed fears and the survival of the divine average. But after the first act, invention failed him and with it, drastically, the corroborative wit. The Atlantic City second act is appreciably less hilarious, the third is a disaster, losing all effect of spontaneity as it incredibly becomes a message from the author, monumentally awkward in those combative passages between Antrobus and his son, a gauche stand-in for the eternal Cain. Somewhere between the acts, Wilder had lost his ear.

> *Antrobus* (to his son): How can you make a world for people to live in, unless you've first put order in yourself? Mark my words: I shall

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> continue fighting you until my last breath as long as you mix up your idea of liberty with your idea of hogging everything for yourself. I shall have no pity on you. I shall pursue you to the far corners of the earth . . . .

It gets even worse, closing with an antiphonal in which Aristotle, Spinoza, and the Book of Genesis are solemnly quoted. Then, much too late to save anything, Sabina's familiar travesty from the first act returns: "Oh, oh, oh. Six o'clock and the master not home yet. Pray God nothing serious has happened to him crossing the Hudson River . . . ."

Wilder had lost more than his ear between the acts of this play. Never again was he to express in fiction or on stage the delicate balance that would rescue his work from over-seriousness or uncomfortable drollery. To the end of his days, with undiscouraged zest, it must be admitted, he announced high-sounding synopses with universal themes which, when written, *if* written, fell dismayingly short of the great unveilings he had promised. With the wisdom conferred by hindsight we can see now that he was consistently evading the deeper insights that visited him as he wrote his journals and his confidential letters. And in 1950 he enacted the grand climax of all those pleasurable but at bottom frantic sorties into Europe which he had so often embarked upon. On this occasion he acknowledged to himself, in his journal, that he was probably guilty of a "false relation" he hadn't adequately probed: "that curious problem as to whether in many of my associations I am truly fond of people or merely indulging in self-approbation for the interest I take in them." He sounds as if he had resolved to cry halt to the gregarious life and settle down so that he could complete an unfinished play (*The Emporium*). "If the autonomy of the inner man were only absolute," exclaims Harrison. "The reality was quite different." And all but incredible.

The first eight weeks of 1950, readings and talks in and around New Haven, Princeton, New York, Washington, and Vassar were followed by a trip to Bermuda. By Harrison's account, by March he had

> done The Hague and Amsterdam, been overwhelmed by hospitality and dreamt of being a "moody, solitary stroller." We pick him up in mid-March in London; tea with Lady Colefax and Lady Rothermere, Beverley Nichols, Osbert Lancaster, choreographer Frederick Ashton; theater and supper with the Oliviers. Lunch in Paris with Toklas. Spain: Valladolid for Holy Week . . . . Having vowed that he wouldn't enter Italy, not even to visit "the adorable Beerbohms," he went to Rapallo [and adored] . . . . He returned to Paris with more engagements and had three crowded days in London the next week: Sybil's every afternoon from half-past four to seven with, "hold your hat," Noel Coward, Lord Wavell, T. S. Eliot, Barbara Ward, Hamish Hamilton, Lord Birkenhead . . . and others. Dover for the night; Oxford for lunch at Wadham College; Covent Garden with Sacheverell Sitwell, Lady Violet Bonham-Carter and Sir Shane Leslie; a matinee of *Hamlet*.

Oh, oh, oh. Six o'clock and the master not home yet. On May 3 he flew there to be in Ohio for an appearance in a student production of *Our Town* for which he took no payment. (In the preceding year he had earned $66,675.55.) On to Chicago, Potsdam, Stockbridge, Boston, Yaddo, Provincetown, Cambridge, Newport, Saratoga Springs. Thereafter a week of pub-crawling in Manhattan with Dylan Thomas, from which he actually escaped to the Red Lion in Stockbridge, where he succeeded in completing long stretches of *The Emporium* by September. "Six months had passed since that journal entry in Saint-Jean-de-Luz." After all this he resumed teaching at Harvard, including sixteen extracurricular lectures, and by the following March he had collapsed. Uncharacteristically, he blamed Harvard for having overworked him instead of facing the fact that he could never say no when his ego was importuned.

What was it all about? The *enthusiasm*

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which Harrison attributes to Wilder was synonymous with a form of creative escapism—creative and endangered. It is impossible to suppose that he didn't enjoy this carousel of shifting scenery and dazzling luminaries, renowned for their talents, their brains, their hyphens, or their cuisines. To assume that his puritan conscience interfered with his relish of the spectacle and periodically undermined him is not a conclusion I'd care to rest with, yet it's not irrelevant. Is it too fanciful to suggest that he was fleeing from a beast in his jungle that understandably he had no wish to confront? Much later he wrote to a friend, "The worst of having been brought up in the late foam-rubber phase of American Protestantism is that we don't have the daring even to think window-breaking thoughts." He recovered from the physical collapse of 1951, but Harrison reminds us that for sixteen years after that breakdown he produced no new novel or play except *The Alcestiad* in 1955 (begun in 1939) and *The Matchmaker,* a rewrite of *The Merchant of Yonkers. The Emporium* was never finished. (Harrison summarizes a novel I'd never heard of, published in 1967, *The Eighth Day,* which "starts as a murder mystery and grows into an extended meditation on the mystery of experience.")

To find, in recent American letters, a writer who didn't crack up resoundingly, become an alcoholic, punch people's noses at parties, take to drugs, or commit suicide is something of a relief. Thornton Wilder simply faded away (as a significant writer, I mean), which is very sad. Yet, as a citizen, Wilder was both exemplary and ornamental. And he *shared the wealth!* Harrison is eloquent on the subject of Wilder's enormous generosity, not only to family members but to almost anyone—friend or unknown supplicant. Who would have wanted him instead to have been indifferent to his fellow man while he faced his beast—if there was one!—in order (so runs the rumor) to have created a masterpiece in a blinding flash of destructive insight?

For some, self-knowledge is too costly.

Irresistible nobility

Virgil The Aeneid. Translated by Robert Fitzgerald. Random House, 402 pages, $20

reviewed by Brad Leithauser

Almost exactly two millennia ago, an ailing Virgil requested that upon his death the manuscript of the vast poem he had been toiling over for the past decade be burned. Of course his friends did no such thing; rather, in editing and publishing *The Aeneid* they helped establish a tradition (later followed with the work of George Herbert and Franz Kafka) in which a writer's friends prove their ultimate friendship by ignoring the writer's wishes or compunctions concerning publication. A similar dissatisfaction and reluctance to publish dogged the most esteemed translator of *The Aeneid* into English, John Dryden, who, pressed by straitened finances and a clamoring public, in 1697 released a version that he considered gravely flawed. For both creator and translator, *The Aeneid* seems to provide an unending labor, and it perhaps would not have been surprising if Robert Fitzgerald, distinguished contemporary poet and classicist, had found the task of modern translation insurmountable.

He has instead produced a consummately polished new version in time for his seventy-third birthday, and in so doing accomplishes what no individual before him in the history of English literature has achieved: complete verse translations of *The Iliad, The Odyssey,* and *The Aeneid.* His *Odyssey,* the first of the three to appear, has already won so wide-ranging an acceptance as to prompt the phrase "a definitive version." It has also sold close to a million copies. Such sales almost certainly make Mr. Fitzgerald (and this is an immensely heartening statistic at a time when readers of contemporary poetry may feel frequent cause for gloom) the best-read living poet of merit in the English language.

His *Aeneid* is cast, like his translation of Homer, in unrhymed lines that average ten

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syllables. If the meter were more iambic, one would call it blank verse. His rhythms are palpable but not always categorizable. There is a danger in writing in no consistent meter (after a while, line breaks can seem arbitrary and the text begin to read like disguised, segmented prose), but Mr. Fitzgerald wholly escapes any prosy feel. The variable lines (some as short as four syllables) are continuously musical and energetic. Compared with the other translations I've read—Dryden's, Rolfe Humphries's, Allen Mandelbaum's—Mr. Fitzgerald's has the cleanest line.

His is also the version that paints the most endearing portrait of Aeneas. Critics have long complained that Aeneas looks lumpish and wooden when set beside Homer's heroes, yet much of the responsibility for any coolness he inspires must be assigned not to Virgil but to the modern reader. In an age in which anti-heroes preponderate, the incorruptible hero can be a little hard to take. The epic hero almost by definition serves a didactic moral function (in the words of Dryden: "The shining quality of an epic hero, his magnanimity, his constancy, his patience, his piety, or whatever characteristical virtue his poet gives him, raises first our admiration. We are naturally prone to imitate what we admire; and frequent acts produce a habit"), and the modern reader will instinctively resist authorly didacticism. Similarly, a modern reader may take a peevish attitude toward the gods and resent as "unfair" their interventions in human affairs; one easily comes to pity the anonymous foot soldier who has no god at his side and falls quickly to the dismembering sword of someone like Aeneas, who is assisted by Venus throughout. Mr. Fitzgerald manages, savingly, to infuse Aeneas with an almost irresistible nobility. One must admire any hero who could pray in language as fine as this:

> Nymphs of the springs,
> Laurentine nymphs, mothers of river kind,
> And Father Tiber with your sacred stream,
> Take in Aeneas as your guest, at last
> Shield him from peril. By whatever source
> The ponds lie that embrace you in your pity
> For our ill fortune, from whatever ground
> You well up in your loveliness, you'll be
> Forever honored and adorned forever
> With gifts from me, O potent stream, great Lord
> Of waters in the west. Only be with me,
> And give me confirmation of your will.

The new Fitzgerald *Aeneid* and the very fine Mandelbaum translation (1972) together display the vast range of styles in which Virgil can be satisfyingly presented to the modern reader. Mandelbaum's verse is strongly iambic, with stray rhymes that now and then recall Dryden. His sentence fragments, shifting verb tenses, packed lines with run-on endings, all powerfully evoke the hurly-burly of warfare, storms at sea, conflagrations. Given two versions at once so distinguished and so different, the reader will have to rely on personal taste. My own conviction is that the Fitzgerald proves more rewarding, especially in moments of grand weightiness or beauty. Compare, for example, the handling of the scene at the end of Book I when a poet, Iopas, is asked to sing after a feast:

> He sings the wandering moon; the labors of
> the sun; the origins of men and beasts,
> of water and of fire; and of Arcturus,
> the stormy Hyadës, and the twin Bears;
> and why the winter suns so rush to plunge
> in Ocean; what holds back the lingering nights.
> The Tyrians applaud again, again.
> The Trojans follow.
>
> (Mandelbaum)

> He sang the straying moon and toiling sun,
> The origin of mankind and the beasts,
> Of rain and fire; the rainy Hyadës,
> Arcturus, the Great Bear and Little Bear;
> The reason winter suns are in such haste
> To dip in Ocean, or what holds the nights
> Endless in winter. Tyrians at this
> Redoubled their applause; the Trojans followed.
>
> (Fitzgerald)

While conveying all required connotations, a "straying" moon shimmers with far more

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magic than a "wandering" one. A translator usually has no license to reach out, as the poet can, to pluck the idiosyncratic or colorful word; generally he must deal on that unobtrusive primary level where meaning is transferred. Mr. Fitzgerald has a masterful flair for selecting a word whose ordinariness will meet the needs of that first level, but that on a second level reverberates with rich associations.

Here is Mandelbaum in the scene—perhaps the most affecting in the poem—when Aeneas seeks to embrace his father in the Underworld:

> His face
> was wet with weeping as he spoke. Three times
> he tried to throw his arms around Anchises'
> neck; and three times the Shade escaped from
> that
> vain clasp—like light winds, or most like swift
> dreams.

And here is Fitzgerald:

> At this his tears brimmed over
> And down his cheeks. And there he tried three
> times
> To throw his arms around his father's neck,
> Three times the shade untouched slipped
> through his hands,
> Weightless as wind and fugitive as dream.

The word "fugitive" is another characteristically felicitous touch. While its simple Latin derivation merely expresses the notion of departure, of flight, the word also carries for the modern reader an overlay of criminality and guilt—a tone well suited to suggest the burden any living son must feel on encountering his dead father.

The Fitzgerald version seems better, too (but here he could hardly *be* bettered), in those scenes where the text allows him to diminish authorial distance by addressing one of his characters directly. His lissome line adapts smoothly to the immediacy and intimacy of these brief moments when *he* becomes *you*. In his *Odyssey,* this shift was memorably handled in the passage where a disguised Odysseus, returning to his homeland after twenty years, encounters his loyal swineherd Eumaios. It's a scene of enormous psychological complexity and contrast, wherein Odysseus speaks of himself in the third person while his pious servant eulogizes an absent master who is in fact present. By offering fresh pork to this seeming beggar, Eumaios without knowing it serves his master handsomely, and Odysseus responds with heartfelt but irony-tinged gratitude:

> "May you be dear to Zeus
> as you are dear to me for this, Eumaios,
> favoring with choice cuts a man like me."
>
> And—O my swineherd!—you replied, Eumaios:
>
> "Bless you, stranger, fall to and enjoy it
> for what it is. Zeus grants us this or that,
> or else refrains from granting, as he wills;
> all things are in his power."

That single, simple line separating the dialogue ("And—O my swineherd!—you replied, Eumaios") displays a superb construction. Indeed, its artistry can perhaps only be seen by placing it beside an adequate but less luminous rendering, as for example that found in Richard Lattimore's fine translation: "Then, O swineherd Eumaios, you said to him in answer." With what quiet skill (the reader begins to see) has Fitzgerald employed those parenthetical dashes, that firming exclamation point, that minimal inversion whereby "you" precedes the swineherd's name.

In *The Aeneid,* characters most frequently become a *you* on the battlefield. Perhaps the most touching of these transformations occurs when Lausus, the admirable son of Aeneas's tyrannical enemy Mezentius, sees his father struck by Aeneas's spear and rushes forward to his father's aid:

> Cheered at seeing Etruscan blood,
> Aeneas in a flash drew sword from hip
> And closed with his shocked enemy. Now
> Lausus
> Groaned at the sight for love of his dear father,

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And down his cheeks the tears rolled.
Here indeed
I shall not fail to tell of that hard death
You came upon, and of your heroism—
If ancientness for a great act wins belief—
And of your memorable self, young soldier.

When deftly handled—as in Fitzgerald they consistently are—these shifts of viewpoint enrich and in a sense double the reader's feeling of pathos: he experiences the moment from both the outside and the inside. (Such shifts are somehow particularly effective in an epic, which by nature takes a panoptic and somewhat detached view of its subjects. All the more poignant, then, are these instants when the wide world is reduced to an old swineherd hunched before a flame, a young sunlit soldier in the glittering final moments of his life.)

The cleanliness of Fitzgerald's line makes him especially effective at those moments, frequent in the poem, when a ship sets sail. The reader feels the yanking of ropes, the pull of oars and the countertug of the current, the familiar, fresh invigoration as the stationary becomes the mobile and the world once more appears to lie open to the plucky and the resolute. Mr. Fitzgerald's verse—one might say by way of final tribute—is seaworthy.

Few tasks are more difficult for a reviewer than that which one could argue is his primary duty: the tentative separation of the lasting from the ephemeral. So many expansive claims of immortality are daily pressed for so many contemporary poets that it would probably be fruitless to assert that Mr. Fitzgerald's is a durable achievement. Nonetheless, the possibility should be noted that fifty or a hundred years hence, the poetry of our era may not be greatly valued and it is our translations that shall best represent us. Should this prove true, the lean, lucid lines of Robert Fitzgerald will still be evoking for readers the distant, warm singing of trumpets, the cold ringing of sword on shield. Certainly, if time alone can serve as arbiter, one could do no better than to link one's fortunes with Homer and Virgil.

Forster in letters

Mary Lago and P. N. Furbank, editors
Selected Letters of E. M. Forster.
Volume One, 1879-1920. Harvard University Press, 352 pages, $20

reviewed by Sonya Rudikoff

In March, 1899, E. M. Forster, twenty years old, at King's College, Cambridge, won a half share of a College prize of four pounds for Latin verse. He spent the money on books: Browning's poems in two volumes, Jebb's edition of Sophocles, a history of Italian painting in two volumes, and, best of all, ten volumes of Jane Austen. He had one pound left. Later that year he won two prizes, and more books were purchased: Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice,* Bryce on the Holy Roman Empire, Seeley on the growth of British policy, a history of King's, and five of Meredith's novels. He had nearly three pounds left after that. The purchases are intriguing. No one in Cambridge today could do half so well, even if all the books were Penguins. The very remoteness of the prices, and the atmosphere they suggest, might serve as an emblem of that vanished world where a fellowship at King's could be three hundred pounds, or a lectureship a hundred and fifty pounds, and life would be agreeable, while a working-class wage hovered "round about a pound a week," with luck. The young Forster had considerably more than a pound a week, although he was not rich. He didn't need to be rich; it was enough to be there, in Cambridge. King's was small—one hundred and thirty students in 1897—but its chapel was tremendous, its Palladian and Victorian Gothic buildings poignant, and its riches extensive.

The image of the Kingsman with his prize money should be kept in mind during a reading of Forster's letters. Edited by Mary Lago and P. N. Furbank, Forster's skilled biographer, this first volume of the selected letters brings Forster to the end of the First World War, and to the very different world that would reveal itself afterward. He be-

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longs securely in his context, although he may also appear to speak to our own. Thus, unlike our contemporaries, Forster wrote five or six personal letters a day, sometimes more. He wrote to his mother frequently (and at length), to his aunt, to his Cambridge friends when he or they were in Italy, Greece, or India, or walking in Scotland or Yorkshire. He was affectionate, witty, thoughtful, and loyal. He described India to his mother in great detail, he would conscientiously go over friends' manuscripts, he could be sharp and direct, as with D. H. Lawrence and Frieda when they were trying to enthrall him. He could also write in a different style, simple, tender, even somber letters to those who had touched his heart.

The very knowledgeable editors supply useful introductory material for periods in Forster's life and add the footnotes necessary to identify issues, persons, or relationships. When the young Forster at Cambridge is invited to take a walk with the legendary Oscar Browning or with the scholar Walter Headlam, when he reports on a conference with his tutor Nathaniel Wedd, or on the boat races, the editors deftly insert enough information for any reader unfamiliar with the people and events, or they provide alternative sources which might clarify the matter. They have chosen from the mass of letters those which present the critical and self-critical Forster his loyal readers know, the cherishing perceptive person aware of complicated textures surrounding the personal life. Included as well are some of Forster's less sprightly letters that indicate difficult, unreconciled, contradictory parts of his life. It was in the encounter with those that the much-appreciated Forster was formed.

Letters are fascinating, especially in an age that doesn't write them naturally. Our contemporaries are more often given to long confessional exercises in free association, which could be sent to anyone, or crowded but fragmentary postcards, or competent little essays sent from various parts of the world, or "expressive" letters aimed clearly not at the recipient but at future scholars and readers. Letters of well-known personages, published in well-documented editions, will be read inescapably as a series of abstract passages. It is difficult to read them as they were written, or as they were once read. They are, supremely, texts without context. When Forster traveled in India during a long six-month trip in 1912, his mother and his aunt read all his letters aloud, and saved them for him to look at on his return and to use for his work. But while he was writing those letters, he was also writing fiction, some of it erotic and unpublishable, or he was having trouble writing. At the same time there was a very personal diary, in which he searched his own motives, feelings, and failures, recording much that never got into the letters, and in a rather different tone. Such disparities of intensity and perspective remind us that letters are not direct transcripts of feeling—not even modern letters—but, rather, they are mediated in and by the epistolary convention. In fact, the voice speaking in letters is one of several voices, and it would be hard to say which of these voices is more true or revealing than the others.

The Forster who wrote his mother letters of arch, cosseting love, charming and cheering her, presenting and preening himself, certainly spoke in a very true and real voice. She was twenty-four when he was born in 1879, his father died when he was not yet two, and his mother never remarried. It was a complicated relationship that structured his life until her death—when she was ninety and he was sixty-six—and he committed his energies to it. From Cambridge he wrote about lunch with the Darwins or the Fulfords, from Germany he wrote about tutoring the children of the Countess von Arnim, the spirited author of *Elizabeth and her German Garden*. From India he wrote about riding on an elephant ("effalunt"). It was cozy and informal, the tone almost that of two children addressing each other in the hostile world of grown-ups. In fact that had been their life during his childhood, when the young widow with her baby was the center of an oppressive Victorian family whose attention she both welcomed and resisted.

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Into his thirties, he was signing himself "Your loving Poppy," or using other pet names or code words of their secret life together. "Whenever I see anything nice I always think 'How I wish Mummy was here to enjoy it too,'" he wrote from Chhatarpur back to Surrey, describing the fantastic Maharajah and his adventures as if India were a part of Surrey. The elephant he rode "was a dear"; so were some black-faced monkeys, and a young Indian friend.

Later, after India, and after Alexandria, where he spent the war years as a Red Cross official, he lived in Surrey with his mother, unable to break up the old pattern. After her death, he stayed on in Surrey, but his last years were spent as an honorary Fellow at King's, among friends and admirers, in a glow of idolization and fame. His moral stature, what his friends called his "holiness," crowned the long years of dissatisfaction in his private life and his work. The Forster of those later years was known for his finely tuned moral temper, his anti-romantic, anti-heroic stance. Living as a rueful sage, installed in his old tutor's rooms, he was much honored by his college and by the world. This was the Forster of *Abinger Harvest,* of *Two Cheers for Democracy,* the Forster who wrote a "domestic biography" of the great-aunt, Marianne Thornton, whose legacy of eight thousand pounds had made possible his life of writing and travel.

This sage, whose wonderfully supple perspective so many of our disaffected contemporaries stumbled upon, didn't really spring into life until other struggles had passed. His early stories and the four Meredithian novels had examined contradictions in modern English life, the English at home and abroad, the problems of the undeveloped heart, and the question of who should or shall inherit England. All this had the flavor of modernity, but then in 1910 or 1911 he paused, because it was not enough to go on exposing contradictions. The love that he wanted to liberate made his next novel unpublishable. Then, *A Passage to India,* perhaps his most widely known work, transferred the entire struggle to another continent, another culture, and a larger and different stage. What became clear in that novel of 1924 was that personal relations matter to the people involved in them but the effect on institutions is more problematic, and the encounter unpredictable. Contradictions did not stay in place. Forster's intense feeling of identity in India—he wished to die there, even—never became real, and he actually spent very little time in India. In contrast, while hating Egypt, especially Alexandria, he stayed on for three years, and it was the setting for his most profound personal experience.

Before the First World War, "advanced" people discovered that England was built upon lies; after the war, the notion became familiar and widespread. Forster added a complication: it was not lies but rather contradictions, and they were more readily displayed than rectified. He became a kind of creative translator between cultures and classes. Humorous, good-humored, passionate for truth, divided between the wish for sincerity and the wish for respectability, his own life expressed the contradictions. His Indians, Egyptians, sailors, tram conductors, bus drivers, or policemen could not be part of Surrey, nor could Surrey be given up. To paraphrase an American expression, Forster could be taken out of Surrey but Surrey could not be taken out of him. He came to cherish that too, quite as much as he cherished the secret thoughts that had to be let loose against Surrey. This divided feeling was to govern much of his life, this habit of responding to the contradictory element, discerning it, even seeking it, and in his fiction providing characters who embodied it.

The great-aunt whose legacy made his writing life possible is hardly mentioned in these letters, nor are there letters to her. She died when he was eight years old. Nor is there any reference to the Thornton house, Battersea Rise, with its beautiful oval Adam library and its thirty-four bedrooms, the home of the Clapham Sect. Those early Victorian Evangelicals and reformers were often in Forster's mind, although rarely in

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his letters. And Rooksnest, the cherished house of his childhood, was re-created when he wrote *Howards End,* but was absent from his letters. All of that was assumed as known and not requiring reference or description. There is no mention of the legacy, either as income or principal, although his categories framed distinctions of wealth, class, and the life of power. So, in 1908, meeting Henry James was thrilling: "It is a funny sensation, going to see a really first class person. I felt all that the ordinary healthy man feels in the presence of a Lord." In 1909, his writing caught the attention of the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, and he was invited to dinner: "I am looking forward to it, and am not in a funk, for Grey is not only charming, but simple, I hear."

Forster had been inducted in class attitudes early, so when in 1899, a young man at King's, he told his mother about his preparations for some visitors, he wondered how he would manage lunch, tea, and friends: "I want a Minstrels gallery like Penshurst." It was the sign of his accepting the rules, to know just how to pretend jokingly that one's own arrangements could be mentioned in relation to that great historic house. To his friend Robert Trevelyan, in 1904, he described the new house in Surrey, mentioning the woods behind it, the rent (fifty-five pounds), the brass-bound doorstep that none of the neighbors had; it was small, though, and had no garden. He was measuring the distance between this and Trevelyan's much greater expectations (he would have an *income* of ten thousand pounds when his mother died). Several years earlier, when Forster first met the Trevelyans, he identified them as descendants of the Trevelyans known to his Thornton ancestors of the Clapham Sect—as if that were *his* capital—but George Trevelyan, the future historian, "doesn't seem to have heard of the Thorntons, which would distress Aunt L.!" All his life Aunt Laura and his mother were credited with these niceties and discriminations. Even in 1919, aged forty, he reported that it was his *mother* who wondered whether his clothes were good enough for a visit to Edinburgh! His own distinctive note, developed in India and Egypt, would be either to turn discriminations upside down, as he did in his choice of lovers, or to encourage in himself the attitudes that might subvert all the received ideas about class. In common with many of his Bloomsbury friends, he adopted the habit of referring in 1911 to "poor George and Mary," verbally overturning deference. In 1912, in India, he would encounter the Maharajah of Chhatarpur and the Maharajah of Dewas Senior, and—the dream of English tourists!—would escape the Anglo-Indian world and see India from the point of view of the natives, high and low.

Earlier, in 1906, part of this cluster of feelings and attitudes unfolded in his relation to a young Indian he tutored in England, and to whom he addressed letters beginning "Dearest boy" or "Dearest SRM" and ending "Yours for ever." Extracts from the diary indicate just how deeply Forster loved Masood, but the letters, although affectionate and intimate, are not love letters. Clearly, the English themes of class and race were worked over between them. After a visit with Masood, in a letter addressing him as "Dearest boy," Forster ended with the very enigmatic "from Forster, member of the Ruling Race to Masood, a nigger," which succinctly illustrates the great problem with these letters, how hard they are to read properly, these texts without context. The Egyptian man, Mohammed el Adl (whose love kept Forster in Alexandria although he hated the city), was not so educated as Masood. The relationship affected Forster profoundly, but it had to be kept secret because Mohammed was a tram conductor, not an Oxford man with whom Forster could visit Paris and exchange letters about poetry, so there are almost no texts for that passion.

Beginning in 1912, however, Forster became very close to the wife of a Cambridge friend, Florence Barger, and it was to her, in England, that he wrote long letters about his emotions in India and Egypt. It was to her that he wrote in 1916 about his "part-

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ing" from respectability, about his need for intimacy, not merely physical satisfaction. Realizing that this might be "odd news" for her, he insisted "but you've got to receive it because you're the only person in the world I want to tell it to. I don't even want George [her husband] to know." A year later, he repeats, "Dearest Florence, R[espectability] has been parted with, and in the simplest most inevitable way, just as you hoped. I am so happy—not for the actual pleasure but because the last barrier has fallen; and no doubt it has much to do with my sudden placidness."

It was in these letters to Florence that the love for Mohammed won lasting reality. Aware of being unable to speak openly to anyone else about his deepest feelings, Forster noted, "I don't know what I should do without you to empty this on to. Here month after month passes and I can't open my lips." In Alexandria in 1918 others could receive his thoughts about politics or the decline of civilization. It was in fact to one of these Alexandria friends that Forster wrote about the new society beginning to emerge after the War:

> The class to which you and I belong is sliding into the abyss. Dispassionately (and dispassionate judgments are easier to make than is supposed) I can't feel it much matters, but a certain amount of precious stuff, a certain tradition of behaviour and culture will perish . . . . At Cambridge scarcely any one takes Classics—it's all Science. Salaries of Professors and Readers remain stationary while those of boiler-makers, plate rollers go up, are reaching them, passing them. There's nothing to be done—and as a matter of fact I do record my unenthusiastic vote for Labour, because, for the wrong reasons, it wants some of the right things, and having attained the right things, it may possibly adopt the right reasons. But it's so puzzling and queer to feel that one's the last little flower of a vanishing civilisation, so exasperating to know that one doesn't understand what is happening, so chilling to realise that in the future people probably won't mind whether they understand or not, and that this attempt to apprehend the universe through the senses and the mind is a luxury the next generation won't be able to afford.

But, as he told Florence Barger, the recipient of these thoughts was "too uncomprehending" to know of the passions with which these thoughts were entwined. Speaking in this manner, however, he became the public Forster we now know, the simultaneous translator of cultures, the defender of contradictions. "Only connect" would be his talismanic gift to his contemporaries and to us as well, but for most of his life it was an aspiration, not an achievement.

Goodbye to all that

A. J. P. Taylor A Personal History. Atheneum, 278 pages, $14.95

reviewed by Robert Nisbet

We don't have in this country an academic who may be said to seriously rival as a celebrity the British author of *A Personal History.* A. J. P. Taylor's scholarship over half a century is formidable: close to thirty solid works in international history and biography, some eminently controversial, but none, I believe, charged with either superficiality or ineptitude. He has household status in his country as a newspaper columnist dealing with up-to-the-minute political and diplomatic affairs; and he is as widely known a television figure as anyone in England. Finally, he has a cultivated sense of the outrageous, both in his university and media roles. "Extreme views weakly held" is his description of his politics.

In the preface to *A Personal History,* Taylor informs us that the book might have been more interesting were it not for the libel law in Great Britain, which by American standards is strict. The legal counsel for his publisher found seventy-six characterizations of the living in the manuscript that encroached upon the libelous. "To say a man was a conscientious objector is libel-

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lous; to say that he was or worse still is a communist is libellous; to say that I wrote a critical review of an historical work is libellous of the author even if the work deserved my criticism." But let the reader worry not. "There is one way out. If the person allegedly libelled is dead, all is well. How eagerly I have gone through the obituaries killing off not only my enemies, not that I have any, but my best friends." Hence, Taylor concludes, any friends searching the index and not finding their names will quickly understand why.

Until his present, third, wife, marriage has presented him with a full share of problems. Taylor informs us that his second wife absolutely forbade any mention of her in this book, and, beyond that, he has observed her wishes, though an affectionate and continuing relationship with the two children of that marriage is described. We can only guess whether wife number two presented him with problems to match those flowing from his first marriage. The early years of that marriage went well enough, but then his wife became infatuated with one of Taylor's Oxford students. The student did not reciprocate, and much effort by Taylor went into saving his student from his wife's more ardent efforts to show her affection.

More serious was her infatuation with Dylan Thomas. It was at the request of friends who thought Thomas a precious genius that Taylor agreed to put him up in his house for an indefinite period. Thomas quickly proved to be an inveterate souse and sponge. Nor was Thomas lacking in a full armory of stings, torments, and cruelties to others, all of which he loved bragging about later (for instance, his stealing all of Adlai Stevenson's shirts while accepting that pathetic statesman's hospitality). After Taylor's wife became smitten by Dylan Thomas, she persuaded her husband to give the poet and his wife, Caitlin, free use of a nearby house that Taylor owned and also to supply her with enough money to keep Thomas in drink and food, the while she could easily indulge herself in the pleasure of his company. Eventually Taylor felt obliged to ask for a divorce, but readers may marvel at patience rarely seen this side of Job.

Taylor thinks much of the cause of his wife's erratic and unfaithful behavior lay in the social life of his college at Oxford, which was, by his account, as barren as it was intellectually sterile. The Fellows of the college, nearly all unmarried, did not take pleasurably to Fellows' wives or even to Fellows who had them. "I spent thirty-eight years in Oxford without making a single intimate friend."

With the exception of a few scholars—Harry Weldon, C. S. Lewis, John Austin, and a couple of others—the intellectual life at Magdalen was little less than suffocating for Taylor. Why he did not resign and go back to Manchester, which he had loved, no one—not even Taylor—knows. He had been a student at Oxford but had not much liked that. He found the tutorial system a bore for the most part and somewhat bogus. "At Manchester we had been concerned to train historians. Magdalen, like all the other colleges, was interested only in getting high examination marks for its pupils. The Final Honors School was scrutinized like a table in the Football League."

Taylor had known Lewis Namier at Manchester. Indeed, their friendship of some twenty years had begun there. One result, Taylor writes, was that he became known in time as Namier's student, which he was not. Indeed, Taylor argues, the reverse would be nearer the truth, inasmuch as he had to explain and show Namier—who had never before taught—the rudimentary details of meeting students, giving lectures, grading papers, and the like. That friendship broke completely during Taylor's Oxford years. When the Regius Professorship became vacant, Taylor and Hugh Trevor-Roper were among those considered to fill it. Namier, who was then at the height of his influence among the university's establishment, told Taylor that he considered him the best qualified historian for the post and would so recommend him, provided that Taylor discontinued his undignified writing of newspaper columns. This Taylor indignantly re-

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jected, arguing that what he did in his spare time was his business. "I put down the telephone and never spoke to Namier again. Trevor-Roper became Regius Professor and the night his appointment was announced Namier dined with him in Christ Church. Evidently Namier wasted no time in getting on to the winning side. Some years later Namier wrote to me and said he would like us to meet. I did not answer his letter. Namier was dead as far as I was concerned."

As for the victorious Trevor-Roper, he too wrote Taylor some years after ascent to the Chair, indicating that if Taylor had been appointed, he (Trevor-Roper) would have been delighted. "I replied," writes Taylor, "that I agreed with him. But as he has enjoyed the Chair and is an incomparable essayist, I do not grudge it to him. As a final touch of irony, he tried to repeat my success on television, not however successfully, and also made fruitless attempts to break into popular journalism. He was lucky to have escaped Namier's ban."

In contrast to Manchester, the beautiful setting of Oxford was desiccating. Still, academic discontent coupled with persisting marital problems did not prevent Taylor from netting a rich yield of scholarly and journalistic work. But some words about Manchester, particularly concerning the house and environment in which he and his first wife lived and had their children, say much about Oxford and the rest of the world: "There I had five years of happiness and contentment—happy in my family, happy in my friends, happy in my work, happy in my surroundings. Five years are not much in life but I suppose they are better than none at all."

Of politics there is much in Taylor's book. The son of parents who combined an affluent existence with relentless radicalism in all political matters, Taylor knew as a boy what it was to thrill to the Bolshevik Revolution. He went with his mother to visit the Soviet Union when Lenin was still alive, and established what has proved to be a lifetime of goodwill toward that country. While in college he joined the Communist Party but tired of it soon. Thus, he says, he was never troubled over Communism in the 1930s. "Having once had the measles, I did not catch them again. The Communist agonizings of the Audens and Spenders seemed to me plain daft. On the other hand, I was pro-Russian. I accepted the Five Year Plan as a demonstration of socialism in action which I still think it was." This is hard enough to read with equanimity, but even more jarring to sensibility is his approval of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1948 and Hungary in 1956. In the first, Taylor argues, the government brought the invasion on itself by failing to give the Czech Communists adequate participation in politics. And the Hungarian assault was made necessary by the growth of a certain reactionary, pro-Horthy sentiment among the people.

Toward German Nazism Taylor's reactions were strongly antagonistic from the start. He wrote and spoke out publicly for British and French resistance to Hitler's military moves. "I was . . . convinced that Hitler was bluffing and would move against Czechoslovakia only if Great Britain and France allowed him to do so—a view that I was glad to see confirmed by the records when I wrote *The Origins of the Second World War.*" From the mid-1930s on, Taylor spoke repeatedly at public gatherings to argue the necessity and the feasibility of stopping Hitler. But always came the reply: "What you are advocating means war. We want peace."

Something should be said about *The Origins of the Second World War.* Few works of historical scholarship have ever raised a storm in England and America comparable to that raised by Taylor's book. Written a decade and a half after the end of the war and based on Taylor's reading of the German archives, the book strongly disputes the conventional view that the war was largely the outcome of Hitler's private plan, going back to *Mein Kampf,* to reduce Europe, then the world, to slavery. The war broke out, Taylor argued in the *Origins,* not by Hitler's design, but by a series of events and deci-

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sions that could not conceivably have been planned beforehand—among them, the alliance with the Soviet Union and the buckling of any British and French resolve to resist forays by Hitler, forays from which Hitler was prepared to retreat immediately were there the slightest sign of Anglo-French opposition. That Hitler was evil Taylor does not deny. But Hitler was, in Taylor's view, one human being, little more important to the outbreak of the war than any of a score of others, including English and French politicians and industrialists. Trevor-Roper was particularly incensed by Taylor's book, and his review must come close to the record in academic excoriation. Taylor writes: "Trevor-Roper was particularly strong on this line, claiming that he had deduced Hitler's every move from the moment he read *Mein Kampf.* If so, he was cleverer than Hitler himself, who dismissed *Mein Kampf* as 'fantasies behind bars.'"

This is not the place to try to assess and judge the great historical controversy. Still, two facts are worth pointing out. The first is that Taylor is insensitive to ideas and the power of ideas in most aspects of life. I remember another diplomatic historian, only slightly less eminent than Taylor, who when asked if he thought the history of ideas possible asked in reply if his questioner thought you could nail jelly to a barn door. I suspect that epitomizes Taylor's view of ideas and history. The fact is, ideas are causes of certain changes and movements, and ideas do emphatically have results, usually unanticipated. The second fact—which pertains to Trevor-Roper's side of the argument—is equally important. A book like *Mein Kampf* may be evil, widely read, and detailed in its expression of desires and hopes, and still be, as a *casus belli,* impotent. The contingent, the casual, and the fortuitous may well play a greater role in the decisions of world powers.

Another contretemps in which Taylor figured was the affair of Anthony Blunt, the "fourth man" in the Philby-Maclean-Burgess spy ring. Blunt suffered loss of knighthood when it was disclosed that in 1964 he had confessed to having earlier been an agent of the Soviet Union, and some Fellows of the British Academy proposed that he also be expelled from its rolls. Taylor tells us that "it seemed very cold mutton to me" and he decided to oppose expulsion. His argument carried the day on first consideration by the Academy, but afterward enough Fellows of eminence threatened to resign if Blunt remained a member that Blunt himself, according to Taylor, proffered his resignation, which was promptly accepted by a no doubt relieved president of the Academy. "So," writes Taylor, "I resigned in my turn. No other Fellow resigned with me: none of those who had encouraged me to speak out against Blunt's expulsion, not even Fellows who were actually members of the Communist Party." We are not, alas, told who those Fellows are, but Taylor's surprise seems disingenuous: Communist members would of course be the very last to resign from a non-Communist body.

The final pages describe Taylor's mandated retirement from professorship and lectureship, from newspaper column and television performance. The inevitable air of sadness is, however, brightly offset by his meeting one Eva Haraszti at the London School of Economics and later marrying her. "For both of us this was a revolution: for Eva a transformation of her life, for me something more—a resurrection." Although seventy, Taylor found himself so rejuvenated by a happy marriage that he once again set himself to writing books, articles, and newspaper pieces, and to performing on television.

So there is a happy ending, but I am obliged to say that this is my last, my very last, autobiography by an academic. It is the best of the genre I have read, but the genre itself should become extinct as soon as possible. Self-justifications, heroic battles over curricula, jousts with other professors over course-loads and class-times, prim jokes about students and professors, horrendous indignities suffered from jealous colleagues, conspiracies by the envious to make difficult or impossible deserved accession to one or

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another of the forest of academic chairs now in existence, intimate if lackluster accounts of marriage and the degree to which it helped or hurt one's trajectory toward the Pulitzer or Nobel, the interesting people one meets on sabbaticals abroad, and so on—all of this is pretty thin soup. I shall henceforth happily deny myself its less than tangy goodness. Oh yes, not to forget the ideological disquisitions. The very highest compliment I can pay Taylor's *Confessio* is to note the lack of these. But, as I have noted, Taylor isn't much given to offering flattery to ideas of any kind.

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Notebook

Talking politics, talking art

by Andy Stark

"The Political Content of Art" was the subject of a symposium held recently at the School of Visual Arts in New York. The participants were Marshall Berman, professor of political science at the City University of New York and author of *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*; Craig Owens, an editor at *Art in America*; and the artists Eric Fischl, Jenny Holzer, and Lucio Pozzi, who acted as moderator. The large audience was composed mostly of students from the School for the Visual Arts, who are presumably serious about preparing themselves for a career in the art world. At the very least they must have found the evening something of a puzzle.

After introducing the panel, Mr. Pozzi offered his own views on the topic at hand. He said that the contemporary New York artist is squeezed between the "bureaucracy of the right" and the "bureaucracy of the left." One specializes in "manipulation and publicity," the other in "doctrinaire demagoguery." Unfortunately, he declined to say which specialty belonged to which bureaucracy. One wondered whether Mr. Pozzi might better have described his dilemma without using the terms "right" and "left," whether in fact his remarks had anything to do with politics at all. He concluded by saying that as an artist in contemporary society he had chosen to elude the political vice-grip as best he could. He was "helpless, but free," and determined to spend his days "regenerating [his] own imagination."

Marshall Berman began his remarks by saying, "We know our lives would be really impoverished without art." For Mr. Berman, who has never chosen to elude the political vice-grip, the word that best characterizes the historical relationship of art and politics is paradox. He cited the case of the sans-culottes, who, in 1793, destroyed the twenty-eight statues of the kings of ancient Israel adorning the facade of Notre Dame in the mistaken belief that they were statues of the kings of France. Certain nineteenth-century conservatives held this act up as evidence of the stupidity of the masses, but, in Mr. Berman's account at least, the joke was on them, since in many ways the kings of France were as despotic as the kings of Israel.

Mr. Berman offered other examples of paradox. The painter Meissonier, after fighting for Louis Philippe in 1848, created a work depicting his own slaughtered victims. Instead of glorifying his feat, however, the painting aroused sympathy for the vanquished. Thus he ended up creating, in Mr. Berman's phrase, a new "counter-counter-revolutionary genre." And then there was Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*. Painted in 1830, it was immediately bought by an admiring government and then placed in storage for fifty years because it was thought the painting could not be exhibited without "stirring up a revolution." Mr. Berman has been teaching a course at CUNY on French political history.

Jenny Holzer, who calls herself a "public

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artist," based her presentation on the premise that "people are concerned about staying alive." She obviously did not share Mr. Pozzi's fond view of the private, inner life of the artist. Referring admiringly to the work of Leon Golub, whose recent paintings depict mercenaries in the Third World, she observed that "the world military is as likely to shoot you as protect you." She went on to praise the artist Justin Ladda for converting an abandoned New York public school into a diorama of life after the coming nuclear holocaust. And she praised Jane Dickson, a New York artist, for establishing a board in Times Square where unknown artists can display their work in twenty-minute intervals. Miss Holzer finished by praising in a more general way all those artists who aspire to move a mass audience with the mass distribution of their mass art.

Craig Owens began by noting that the panel was without credibility because it included no blacks or Hispanics and only one woman. He speculated that much of the audience was present by virtue of a notice of the event placed in that morning's "Going Out" section of *The New York Times*. Then he took up, in his way, the subject at hand. His remarks fell into that particular class of propositions, undistinguished as yet by a generic name, which are to falsehood what platitudes are to truth. He defined politics as the subversion of institutions and insisted that these days any work of art that is immediately recognizable as art cannot in fact be art. He later stated, by way of example, that Marshall Berman was only able to recognize some "Lower East Side" art *as* art when Mr. Berman saw it in a show at the Whitney.

The force of Mr. Owens's remarks was that none of his panel colleagues had ever produced an authentic work of art, or held an authentic political position. He did, however, have a kind word to say about Jenny Holzer. She, at least, recognized that since Kant and Rousseau an important shift had taken place "in the only point at which the social body can cohere." That point had moved from the creator to the spectator. According to Mr. Owens, Miss Holzer's realization has led her to dismiss the "isolated ivory tower" in which the "elitist creator" cloisters himself. (He apparently had in mind here Mr. Pozzi, among others.) He said that Miss Holzer had seen how crucial it is to get out on the streets with a mass-produced art that is to be mass-distributed to the common man. He concluded by explaining that he was speaking from an essentially "Gramscian position." (Antonio Gramsci was an Italian Marxist theoretician. He somehow achieved great influence despite living much of his life in social isolation and composing most of his important works on postcards, napkins, and other such scraps as could be smuggled in and out of his prison cell.)

It was finally Eric Fischl's turn. He began: "Craig Owens is a twit. He would love nothing more than to replace the word 'artist' with the word 'critic.' We won't play, Craig." He then described the catharsis he experiences in his studio and the pleasure he feels when he creates a "unique object" that few will see. He ended by praising the solipsistic artistic mind. There followed a brief exchange among the panelists. Recycling a current academic cliché of the old Left, Mr. Pozzi accused Mr. Owens of "recycling the old clichés of the new Left." Mr. Owens admonished Mr. Pozzi for his smug radical-chic institutionally co-opted ivory-towerism.

Then it was the audience's turn. It soon became apparent that its understanding of the topic "the political content of art" was very different from the panel's. The first questioner noted that in speaking of mass distribution, privatization, keeping works of art in closets for fifty years, displaying art so that it is not obviously art, and so forth, the panel was really talking "as if politics were indigenous to the way art is presented." The panel was dealing with politics in the "format" of art but not in its "content."

Mr. Pozzi assured the questioner that "format is content." Miss Holzer suggested that painting a picture of vegetation in upstate New York while lobbying Congress to

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stop U.S. involvement in Nicaragua might be more effective than "painting a picture of vegetation in Nicaragua" (and, presumably, lobbying Congress to end U.S. involvement in upstate New York).

Eventually a woman in the audience pointed out that the panel had not taken up one very important question: the quality of a work of art. Does it suffer from the imposition of a political content? Is there a tension between aesthetics and politics? For example, she preferred the politics of Ben Shahn to those of Henri Matisse, but she liked Matisse better as an artist. Mr. Fischl responded by defying her to point to that place in Matisse's *opera* where the Nazis came for his wife and children. Matisse "didn't skip a beat," Mr. Fischl said approvingly. By declining to let personal political turmoil figure in his work, Matisse performed "a fantastic artistic act."

It was Matisse's insularity from politics that Mr. Fischl seemed to admire most, and not the political innocence of his art, but that was perfectly in keeping with the evening's focus—or its lack of focus. The artists talked about artists, about the place of politics in the artist's life. The political critics talked (ideologically) about history: Mr. Berman about its left-wing cunning, Mr. Owens about its co-opting right-wing dynamic. Art itself was hardly mentioned, and the "political content of art" was never discussed.

Raised hand after raised hand continued to vie for the attention of the moderator, but Mr. Pozzi drew the meeting to a close by announcing that the issue had been dealt with as adequately as possible. He was now going home "to paint a still life of flowers."

Perhaps it was fitting that a meeting that began with a discussion of Delacroix's very political, very public art should have ended with Mr. Pozzi's spoken wish to retire to his vestibule and paint flowers. At the time of Delacroix's death, the critic Silvestre wrote:

> Thus died Delacroix, a painter of a noble race, who had a sun in his head, and a thunderstorm in his heart, who turned from the warriors to the saints, from the saints to the lovers, from the lovers to the tigers, and from the tigers to the flowers.

Earlier in the meeting, Mr. Owens had said that in today's world to move from Mr. Pozzi's self-indulgent "question of what the artist is to do to . . . mass distribution is to import politics" into the artistic enterprise. Yes. And perhaps to move in these times, as Delacroix did in his, from ideological warriors and saints to flowers is to import—or re-import—art into the artistic enterprise.

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Letters

Clement Greenberg

To the Editors:
It seems to be the fashion today to attack Clement Greenberg, and the letter from Rackstraw Downes printed in the November issue is only one of a number I have read recently that I think require a response. It appears that the time is right to take shots at what is perceived, by the uninformed, as a "doctrine" of thinking about and looking at art. These people always attack what they believe to be the great symbol of this particularly "abhórrent" way of thought, Clement Greenberg. These attacks would not be worth further thought if they were not symptoms, and/or causes, of a real problem.

It needs to be said that there can be no one who gives more of himself, in time spent looking at art and talking to artists, than Mr. Greenberg. What people like Mr. Downes fail to understand is that Mr. Greenberg's job, when asked a question by a painter in a studio, or when writing a review or criticism, is to be as forthright as he can be. He also, as we all do, has the right to change his mind, and has done so many times, both in and out of print. An artist's job is either to accept what Mr. Greenberg has to say or to disregard it. It's not Mr. Greenberg's responsibility to change people's ideas or art. His job, as is that of any good critic, is to tell it as he sees it. He continues to do so amid all this about his so-called dogma and influence.

Lawrence B. Salander
New York

The spoken word

To the Editors:
Lest the uninitiated be led astray, someone should correct Tom Paulin's misrepresentation of a central tenet of Jacques Derrida's linguistic doctrine. Paulin's review of Hugh Kenner's *A Colder Eye* (November, 1983) opens by deploring the current academic exaltation of oral utterance over writing, pointing fairly enough to Rousseau's *Essai sur l'origine des langues* as its ultimate source. Yet exactly contrary to Paulin's assertion, in *Of Grammatology,* the very work his review cites, Derrida goes to his usual verbose lengths to refute and indeed reverse Rousseau's view. Writing, he would have it, is in fact conceptually if not chronologically prior to speech and even inclusive of it. Orality, the myth of a pristine "presence" in the spoken word, figures as an aspect of that more encompassing metaphysical "logocentricism" which in several works Derrida labors mightily to "deconstruct" once and for all.

Given the opacities of his syntax (even in the original French) and the perversities of his jargon, anyone may be excused for missing some of his points. But in its conclusion if not always in the reasoning by which it is reached this one is clear enough.

Emerson R. Marks
Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts

Tom Paulin replies:
Emerson Marks is right. I told myself as I wrote that Derrida somehow argues that writing is prior

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to speech, but I'm unable to take him seriously and so didn't point this out. Essentially, he seems to be a type of oral pastoralist, like Rousseau, and I can't defer to the difference between them. But I defer to Mr. Marks's more exacting knowledge and accuracy.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

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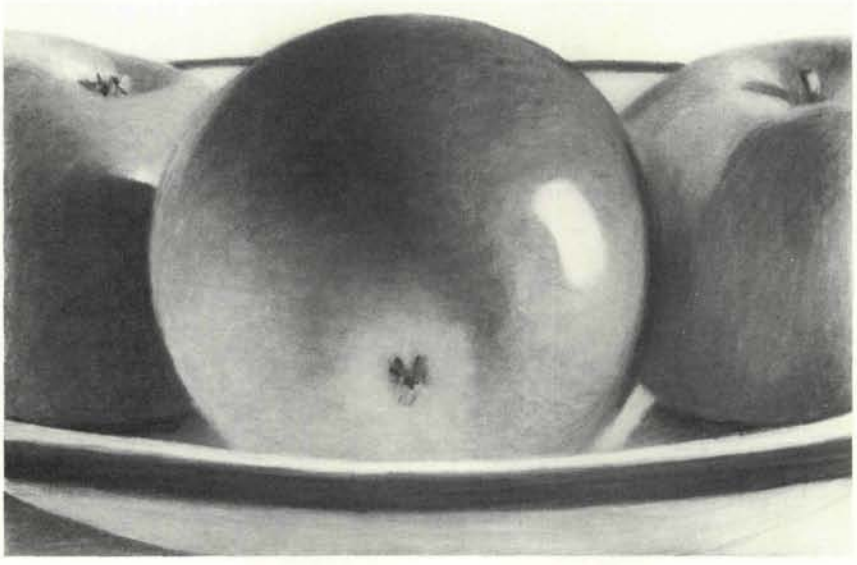

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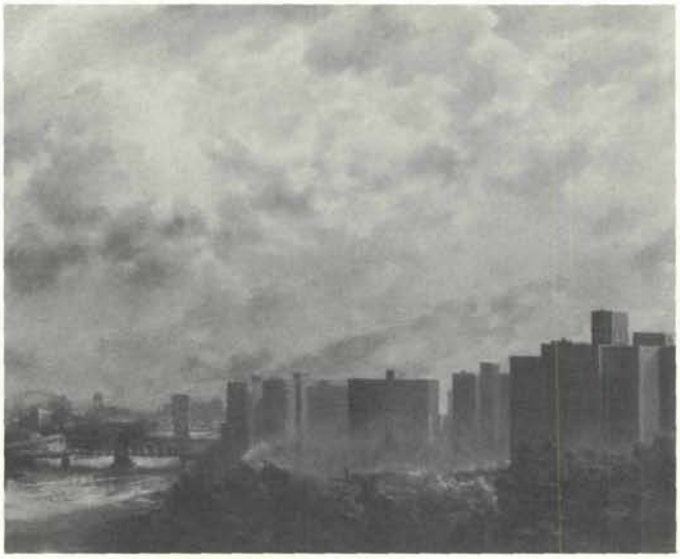

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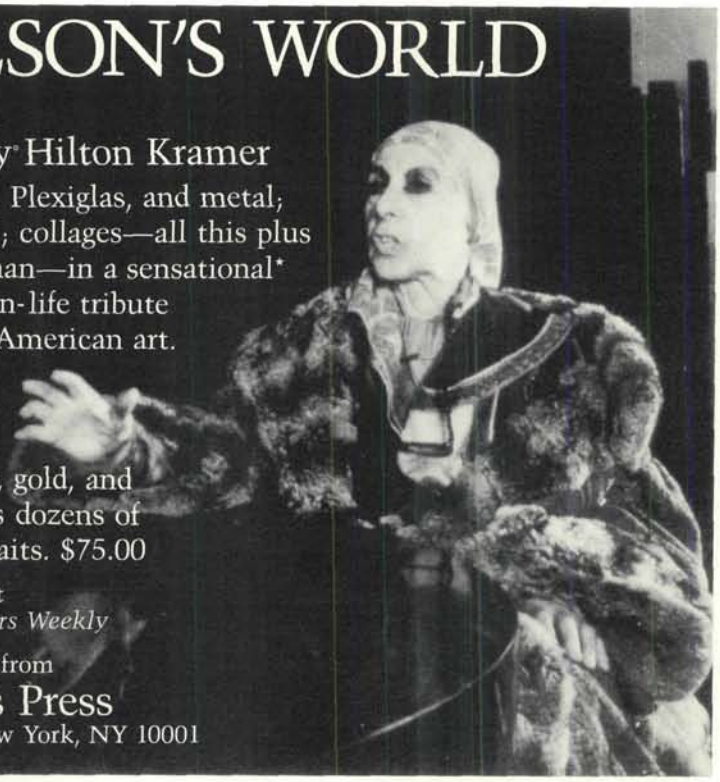

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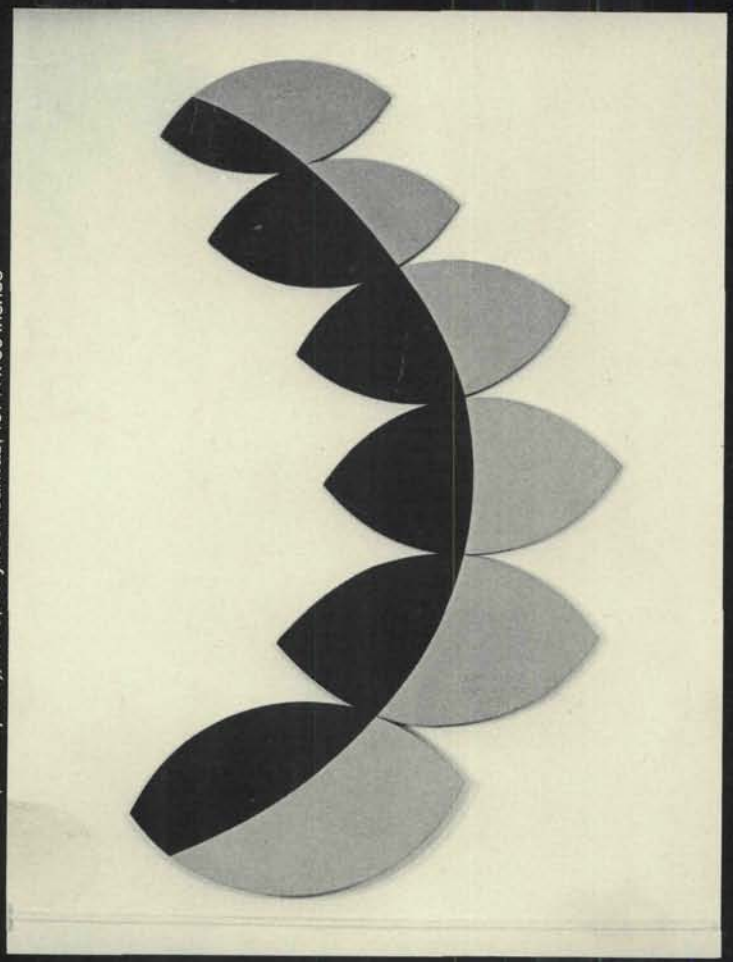

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